



Potsdam

A key player in bringing cities together across Europe

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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 in founding the German Alliance Cities of Save Harbours (Bündnis “Städte Sicherer Häfen”).

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

Potsdam 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 to 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-lasting 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?

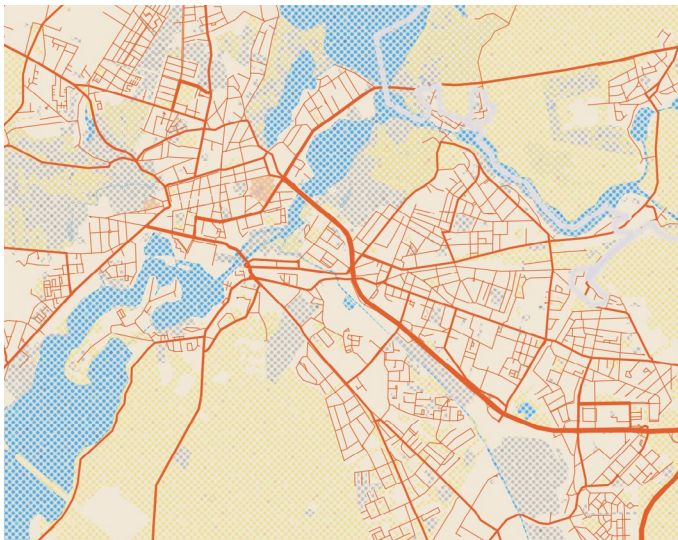
A proactive mayor: Since the fall of communism, Potsdam has, as a German state capital, had a left-liberal character. The recent engagement of Mayor Mike Schubert in advocacy work and the city's openness to collaborate with civil society initiatives are two other main factors.

What are the most outstanding results so far?

The German Alliance “Cities of Safe Harbours”: 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 (International Alliance of Save harbours (IASH)). 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 International Alliance of Save Harbours 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 reform. The “Potsdam Declaration,” on which the network is based on, is the most important document of the cities movement for municipal refugee reception in Germany.



Population

180.334

Location

East Germany, Capital of the federal state Brandenburg (eastern Germany)

Mayor

Mike Schubert (SPD)

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 the state of Brandenburg, was never considered a “nationally liberated zone,”¹ racist violence was a problem here as well, and people with an immigrant background suffered in particular. Therefore, as early as 2000, the city founded the alliance “Potsdam bekennt Farbe”. It is still active today in matters of local refugee policy. The alliance is also an information pool. It unites civil society and governmental organisations, companies, parties, and parliamentary groups of the city council of Potsdam. The founding period was marked by right-wing extremist acts of violence against refugees. At that time, for example, the Stadtportbund (Municipal Sports Association) tried to set an example against 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 get-togethers 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 mission statement for an “open and tolerant city”. All of these and many other municipal activities probably contributed to the fact that extreme right-wing groups had a hard time to establish. This improved everyday life and made it easier for refugees to arrive and integrate.

¹ “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.

² 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.

Facilitating Family Reunion

In terms of local reception, the city was already trying to promote family reunification at the local level well before the Cities of Safe Harbour network was founded. A number of Potsdam citizens did humanitarian volunteer work in refugee camps in Greece, starting in 2015. 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.² 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 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 could reach a safe place.

Increasing access to integration courses

In its 2016 integration concept, the city of Potsdam committed to providing a “broad, continuous range of language and integration courses” in the city to meet demand and give everyone access to German classes at levels A1 to B2. This was decided against the backdrop of many refugees losing years for language acquisition due to a regulation that only gave access to integration courses to refugees with a so-called “good perspective of staying”.³ These included Eritrea, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Somalia. On the other side, 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

Considering the living situation of refugees in the city of Potsdam, 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 period. For some time now, the city had actually committed 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.” 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.

³ Since 2015, asylum seekers during the ongoing asylum procedure and so-called “Geduldete” have access to integration classes. These courses in the German language and on living conditions in Germany (“Orientierungskurs”) are paid for by the federal government and are considered an important step in building a new life. The catch: the federal government only covers the costs of up to 1,000 hours, if people match the defined “good perspective of staying”.

⁴ <https://seebruecke.org/>

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 Safe 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 movement⁴ since 2018 was that the federal states and municipalities were 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 changing this regulation. Since then, Potsdam has made 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 had instructed him eleven months earlier, he addressed the municipalities’ desire for an independent right to admit refugees.

Schubert points out that the community of “cities of safe harbours” are home to over 23 million people – over 28 percent of Germany’s population. The demand to first save human lives – and then 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 the competence to admit refugees. In addition, a reform of the distribution process was to be established for those seeking protection rescued from distress at sea. For this purpose, the idea was to establish an agreement between the federal states and the state government on the direct admission of people rescued from distress at sea, he suggests.

However, the federal government remained reserved. Civil societies 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 path: 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 the

coordinating role 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 were also involved. The working group is formulating a 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 – we need to change the law,” she says. The BMI also participated in the second meeting of the entire network in November 2020. The network’s signal towards 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 advocacy 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 online 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 of Save Harbours anymore,” Löbel says. Although Merkel had referred to a “European solution” during the meeting, she had to listen to the mayors. “A year ago this had been unimaginable.” Löbel therefore believes that the change of law being drafted by the Cities of Safe Harbours Alliance has a realistic chance of ultimately being adopted 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 “Welcoming 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 of Potsdam.” Antiracist activists demanded that the authority should no longer treat foreigners — including refugees — in a discriminatory man-

ner.

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 an “average bad foreigners authority”. Not only did people have to put up with extremely long waiting times — the authority had also shown little commitment 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 harbour” brought motion to the discussion about the city’s foreigner’s authority. “The Safe Harbour Alliance is a great project of the mayor, but it can’t be that there is at the same time a foreigner’s authority that works against these efforts,” says Fricke. In fact, the “Solidarity City” resolution passed by the 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 legally possible. On the subject of family reunification, too, the authority should use its discretionary powers in favour of the applicants. A new “mission statement” for the authority was to be created.

A working group that was appointed by the mayor himself, has started to put up its work in May 2019. It is formally part of the municipal network “Potsdam bekennt Farbe“. The head of Potsdam’s authority is also part of the network.

In an interim report of November 2019,⁵ 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. In a new guiding principle, it is to be stipulated that

⁵ Inventory and recommendations for action - preparation for the implementation of the decision of the city council to “consider all possibilities to create permanent legal residence for refugees in Potsdam”. AG Ausländerbehörde, Stand: 24.11.2019

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 they could profit from. 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.

In August 2020, the foreigner’s authority evaluated 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 allied 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.⁶ It was the first letter of this kind.⁷

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 Jann Jakobs (mayor of Potsdam 2002 - 2018) and Potsdam joined the initiative.⁸

Four months later in December 2018, the city council decided Potsdam would declare itself to be a “Safe Harbour.”⁹ In the resolution, newly elected mayor Mike Schubert, who had taken office in the meantime, was charged with a series of national lobbying measures. These included, 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 was asked to publicly express solidarity with sea rescuers and take over sponsorship of a rescue mission.¹⁰

The Potsdam Declaration

⁶ <https://www.duesseldorf.de/aktuelles/news/detailansicht/newsdetail/duesseldorf-koeln-und-bonn-angebot-und-appell-zur-fluechtlingshilfe-an-kanzlerin-merkel-1.html>

⁷ <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/bonn-duesseldorf-und-koln-wollen-gerettete-fluechtlinge-aufnehmen-8428726.html>

⁸ <https://www.potsdam.de/475-potsdam-unterstuetzt-forderungen-von-bonn-koeln-und-duesseldorf>

⁹ <https://www.potsdam.de/de/sicherer-hafen-potsdam#:~:text=Die%20Landeshauptstadt%20Potsdam%20hat%20sich,Brief%20an%20Bundesinnenminister%20Horst%20Seehofer.>

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ <https://www.potsdam.de/potsdamer-erklaerung-der-staedte-sicherer-haefen>

¹² https://kommunalwiki.boell.de/index.php/St%C3%A4dtebet%C3%BCndnis_Sicherer_H%C3%A4fen

¹³ <https://www.potsdam.de/387-kommunen-gruenden-buendnis-staedte-sicherer-haefen>

In the following months, Potsdam joined forces with seven other German municipalities. On 3 June 2019, shortly before the 40th general assembly of “Deutscher Städtetag” in Dortmund, the “Potsdam Declaration”¹¹ was published. Here, they affirmed their will to admit refugees, hoping that other municipalities would join. And they were successful: By the time of the Städtetag conference, more than 50 municipalities had joined the initiative.¹²

Soon after, the city of Potsdam co-organised the conference *Leinen los für kommunale Aufnahme* (“Cast off for municipal reception”) by the Seebrücke initiative in Berlin’s city hall on 14 June. There, 12 municipalities founded the network “Cities of Safe Harbours.”¹³

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 at 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 called on the federal government to transform the ad hoc solution negotiated to take in people rescued from the Mediterranean — known as the “Malta Protocol” — into a long-term solution. For this purpose, the municipalities were to be given the opportunity to implement their offer of admission within the European distribution procedure. The alliance demanded “adequate financial and organisational support.”

In February 2020, the network pushed again. 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 Greek hotspots. And 500 places for unaccompanied children have been offered by German cities. We could help immediately,” 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.¹⁴

The German government announced shortly afterwards that it would allow an initial three-digit number of people to travel from Greece to Germany. Until today, municipalities still cannot decide independently on admissions.

5. Update: What is new in 2023?

- ◆ In May 2023, Potsdam was the first city to declare its willingness to implement the model project ‘Spurwechsel’ from the Brandenburg Ministry of Integration. The aim of the model project is

¹⁴ https://www.potsdam.de/sites/default/files/documents/2020_03_06_gemeinsame_erklaerung_gefluechtete_sofortprogramm.pdf (Retrieved in 2021)

¹⁵ <https://www.potsdam.de/212-modellprojekt-spurwechsel-landeshauptstadt-und-sozialministerium-informieren-ueber-die-geplante>

¹⁶ https://www.potsdam.de/system/files/documents/positionspapier_buendnis_staedte_sicherer_haefen.pdf

to offer prospects to refugees living in Potsdam who have been “geduldet” for many years and who cannot be deported to their countries of origin in the foreseeable future. At the same time the approach aimed to combat the existing shortage of workers in the labour market.¹⁵

- ◆ In contrast to the strong push to further restrict migration by conservative city governments, the ‘Cities of Safe Harbours’ alliance published a position paper on the occasion of the federal-state refugee summit in May 2023 (commissioned by Potsdam’s mayor Mike Schubert) in which the alliance reaffirms that the member municipalities stand by their position of solidarity. Despite the increasing number of refugees – especially due to the Russian war on Ukraine – they still have the capacity and the ambition to take in people. Accordingly, the alliance strongly calls for more solution-oriented communication between the federal, state and local governments.¹⁶
- ◆ On 22 April 2023, a twinning agreement was signed between the city of Potsdam and the Ukrainian city of Ivano-Frankivsk. The partnership is a sign of solidarity and is intended to serve both, international understanding and practical exchange.¹⁷
- ◆ Potsdam also campaigned for the establishment of a European network of cities. In June 2021, in cooperation with the Seebrücke movement and the city of Palermo, the city organised the conference “From the Sea to the City: a city conference for a welcoming Europe”, which was attended by European mayors, city representatives and civil society actors from all over Europe. On this occasion, a declaration was signed in favour of humanitarian corridors and safe migration routes, and the International Alliance of Safe Harbours (IASH) and the civil society network From the Sea to the City (FSTC) were founded.¹⁸ Both alliances are still active and work closely together at the European level.

¹⁷ <https://www.potsdam.de/169-staedtepartner-schaft-mit-ivano-frankivsk-offi-ziell-besiegelt>

¹⁸ <https://fromseatocity.eu/about/>

The **Moving Cities** project provides an in-depth research of progressive cities in Europe, exploring their most inspiring and successful approaches to migration policies. Find more city reports at www.moving-cities.eu.

Read more about the project and how it is funded on the website: <https://moving-cities.eu/about>
