



## **The asylum and refugee policy of the Federal Government**

**Carsten Körber**

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### **Summary**

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Since last summer, the asylum and refugee crisis has confronted Germany and Europe with a special challenge. This has been the largest wave of refugees since the Second World War. In 2015, a total of some 1.1 million refugees arrived in Germany. The right of asylum is firmly anchored in the Basic Law as a basic right.

Germany faces major political and social challenges. The country's willingness to help refugees who fear for life and limb remains unabated. The situation has, however, made it necessary for the Federal Government to take measures to reduce the number of refugees coming to Germany. These measures, which are oriented first and foremost towards economic refugees, are beginning to take effect. A societal consensus is now focused on integrating those refugees who will be remaining in Germany permanently.

### **About ISPSW**

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## Speech

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour to me to have the opportunity to speak to you as part of today's event. Thank you very much for your invitation, which I was delighted to take up!

When the Beijing office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung asks me if I would like to take part in a conference in China, I never hesitate to say yes, and I happily come here to Beijing. I do so because I know that the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's events are of high quality and because China is an important partner for Germany and Europe. So I would especially like to thank Thomas Awe and his team at the Adenauer-Stiftung very much for this invitation.

Over the course of today we have already heard a lot about relations between China and Europe and between China and Germany. We have extensively discussed the possibilities for a strategic partnership between the EU and China. Mutual economic relations are not the only thing that plays a role here. Questions of joint cooperation in the area of security and stability are also important, which brings me to the subject of this speech.

### **I. What happened in recent months in Germany and Europe?**

Since last summer Europe has been confronted by a very special challenge. I am speaking of the asylum and refugee crisis. Germany and Europe have faced the largest number of refugees since the end of the Second World War. The fact that people from war- and crisis-torn regions flee to Europe is, of course, not a new phenomenon. The sheer number of people who have come to us since last summer, however, presents an entirely new dimension.

In the past year, 1.1 million refugees have come to Germany. They have come to a country where 80 million people live. Some 500 million people live in the entire European Union.

Taking in these refugees was an act of humanity. It is, however, clear to us that we cannot take in a million new refugees every year. Worldwide, more than 60 million people are currently displaced. Two thirds of them, by the way, are internally displaced within their own country. I believe that the international community has a humanitarian responsibility to combat the causes of displacement worldwide.

People are fleeing to Europe because they hope for peace, freedom, security and prosperity there. In short, they are seeking a better life there. Europe stands for all of these things.

The path to today's Europe has been a long one. For centuries, European history was also marked by war, tyranny and deprivation. It took two world wars, which brought Europe to the brink of absolute annihilation, for us Europeans to learn the lesson in the last century that we can only live in a peaceful future if we work together rather than against one another. This idea of Europe, born from the ashes of the Second World War, has brought us 70 years of peace, freedom and prosperity. We have never had this before. And this is precisely why European unification is so important.

The Schengen Agreement has been one of the crucial milestones of European unification. Twenty-six countries waive all border controls with one another and grant one another free movement of persons. A secured, common EU external border is a necessary condition for this.



The refugee crisis is not a German problem; it is at minimum a European problem. Together we need to increase our efforts to secure this EU external border. When hundreds of thousands of people are coming to Europe without any controls, we need to regulate and limit this influx. The Federal Government's overarching goal is to reduce the number of refugees without abandoning the Schengen Treaty. Abandoning Schengen would be a disastrous step backwards for European unification.

The main refugee route to Europe has run through Turkey and Greece. Turkey is bordered by Syria in the east and Greece in the west. That is the reason for the objective of not only reducing the number of refugees but also, as far as possible, keeping people within the region, that is to say in Turkey.

This was also the reason for the EU's agreement with Turkey in late March. Turkey is halting illegal entry into the EU and combatting the smuggling of human beings. In return, the EU is accepting 72,000 legal Syrian refugees from Turkey, contributing 6 billion euros to improve the situation of Syrians in Turkey and granting Turkey visa-free travel beginning this summer. Turkey has, by the way, taken in 2.7 million Syrian refugees, more than any other country.

## **II. But who is it that has come to us?**

Of the more than 440,000 applications for asylum that were made in 2015, nearly 160,000 were made by Syrians. They accounted for 36 per cent of the applications, by far the largest group, and 80 per cent of their applications for asylum were approved. In 2015, some 30 per cent of all asylum-seekers came from the Western Balkans. Less than one per cent of them were granted asylum. We have now designated the Western Balkan countries as safe countries of origin. That is to say, their nationals can no longer be granted asylum in Germany. In December 2015, Iraqis and Afghans were the next-largest groups of asylum seekers after Syrians, each accounting for about 20 per cent of applications. The large remaining group of refugees came primarily from North Africa.

These groups were displaced for different reasons. People from Syria were fleeing from civil war. In most cases, those from Iraq and Afghanistan were fleeing due to the political instability of their home countries and out of fear that civil war would break out. The majority of those from other countries are in most cases economic refugees who leave their homes due to poverty and lack of future prospects. Poverty is, however, not grounds for asylum.

## **III. How is this changing Germany?**

The refugee situation poses major challenges to Germany at every level. Our political attention, however, must of course be focused above all on our own citizens and all those who are already living in Germany today.

We Germans are doing better than ever before in our history. And the greater one's personal prosperity, the greater one's fear of losing this prosperity. Some people fear that the prosperity of 80 million Germans is threatened by a million refugees. The absurdity of this notion that Germany is being overrun by foreigners is illustrated by an example that is often cited these days: Imagine 80 men all sitting in a bar. The door opens and another man comes in and sits down. Who would claim that the bar was now suddenly overcrowded? Nobody.



The right of asylum is a major achievement. Our history teaches us this, as does our Christian understanding of humanity. But there is also a danger that our current asylum law is reaching its limits if we were to continue to receive a refugee volume of a million people this year and in future years. I would draw the line at the point at which we run the risk of jeopardising Germany's social cohesion or our economic productivity, which is what makes it possible in the first place for us to fulfil the material needs of the right of asylum. There are two strict limits here: firstly, our societal will and capacity for integration and secondly, our economic and material capacity to take in a certain number of additional refugees.

It is entirely legitimate for communities to keep an eye on their own interests. Germany and Europe stand in a tradition of Western Christianity. Fortunately, our history is not only one of wars and catastrophes, but also of revolutions, social change and the Enlightenment. In our free, open and pluralistic society, religion and faith as well as superstition have been supplanted in many ways by science, logic and rationality. This is not yet the case in many of the regions from which refugees, many of them Muslims, come to us.

We can rightly expect every refugee to adapt to our traditions, our culture, and our legal and social order. Every refugee can in return expect to be able to live in safety in Germany and to receive a clear and unequivocal message from us about what we expect of them.

This includes the fact that in our country all people are free to believe what they wish, or not to believe in any faith at all. It includes the equal status of men and women. It includes the freedom of every person to say what they want within the limits of the law. And it also includes the fact that our laws are made not by the Prophet, but by a democratically elected parliament. Religion is a private matter and for us laws stand above religion. Refugees have an obligation to recognise this.

The task of policy here is to have an eye on all kind of different groups with all of their valid interests, concerns and demands and to balance these against one another. This is not always easy, for Germany will change as a result of the refugee crisis. This is also a consequence of globalisation, and no country can evade globalisation.

#### **IV. But how exactly has policy in Germany reacted thus far?**

The right of asylum is enshrined in our Basic Law as a basic right. Persons persecuted on political grounds have the right of asylum. Last autumn the Government tightened asylum regulations through what is known as Asylum Package I, which entered into force at the end of October. The aim of this package was to ensure that the number of refugees coming to us was reduced in such a way that mainly those who actually have a legal claim to asylum would come to Germany—that is, persons persecuted on political grounds and refugees fleeing civil war, but not economic refugees.

Asylum Package II entered into force in March 2016. This package is aimed above all at all those who come to Germany for purely economic reasons. These people will now be sent back to their home countries more quickly. It is of course completely understandable from a human perspective that nobody wishes to live in poverty or without future prospects. Germany, the EU and many other countries provide development aid worldwide to improve the situation of the poorest of the world's poor.



## V. The outlook

The Federal Government is currently planning its 2017 federal budget. When the Federal Cabinet has passed its cabinet decision on the budget, I as a member of the Bundestag Budget Committee will soon immerse myself fully in budget deliberations once more. The asylum and refugee crisis will play an important role in these deliberations.

A broad societal consensus supports increasing spending in the area of internal and external security and on foreign policy and development aid issues. In our foreign and development policy, we will in the future take our own interests into greater consideration as a criterion. That is why we will also increase our involvement in the regions and countries of the world in which we have the greatest interests – for example, in order to combat regional conditions which cause people to flee that region to come to Germany.

In the future we will continue to help people who are persecuted or whose lives are in danger due to civil war. What this means above all is supporting those in need in regions in crisis and in neighbouring countries. And we will continue to receive refugees in the future. Those who come to Europe solely for a better standard of living, however, must return to their home countries in every case.

Integration is a necessary condition for Germany itself to be able to benefit from the refugees. For this reason, the 2016 federal budget has earmarked nearly eight billion euros for refugee- and integration-related expenditures from a budget of nearly 320 billion euros. This is money well invested, and it does not come at the cost of previously decided expenditures, for example, for investment or social welfare benefits. The asylum and refugee crisis will change Germany. And it will change Europe. I am confident, however, that we will master this challenge.

Much remains to be done. The asylum and refugee crisis reached its climax in 2015. But our humanity, our strength and our capabilities obligate us to do our best for people who flee to us from war and terror and for people who do not have the opportunity to flee to safety. Europe and the international community can accomplish this.

Our actions here are guided by the preamble of our Basic Law: “Conscious of their responsibility before God and man, Inspired by the determination to promote world peace as an equal partner in a united Europe.”

Be there at our side.

Thank you very much for your attention!

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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## About the Author of this Issue

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Carsten Körber, born in 1979 in Zwickau (then DDR – German Democratic Republic), has been a member of the German Bundestag since 2013. He is a member of the Budget Committee and Auditing Committee; and a substitute member of the Committee on Economic Affairs and Energy.

He graduated in political science and business administration (MA) at Chemnitz University of Technology. From 2002 to 2012, he assisted to and was in charge of the constituency office of a Member of the German Bundestag from Saxony. He became head of the Economic Development Office of the city of Zwickau in 2012 and since then he has been acting also as a self-employed business and management consultant.

He has been member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) since 2002, chairman of the Mülsen local branch of the CDU since 2005; and first deputy chairman of the Zwickau county branch of the CDU since 2012. He was member of the municipal council from 2009 to 2015, and deputy mayor of Mülsen until 2012.



*Carsten Körber*