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FIVE QUESTIONS TO KARL BRENKE

»Germany particularly affected by current influx of refugees«

1. Mr. Brenke, a large number of asylum seekers are currently making their way into Europe. Is this affecting Germany more than it is affecting other countries in Europe? Yes, this is quite clearly the case: According to current figures, half of this summer's asylum seekers are headed to Germany. Assuming a uniform distribution across the EU, Germany receives three times as many asylum seekers as do other countries, and based on each respective country's economic power, it receives twice as many. Some countries are being even more heavily affected: Hungary, Bulgaria, and Sweden, for example. The other large EU countries – Britain, France, Spain, and Italy – are accepting relatively few asylum seekers.
2. Why isn't there an equal distribution across Europe? For sure, the most significant reason is that some countries strongly oppose the quotas – which are calculated based on economic strength or total population – of asylum seekers they must accept. The UK is a major example: Measured against the average in a hypothetical equal distribution, the UK would have to take in more asylum seekers, but they don't want to. Other countries are sending similar messages. Another problem we have is that some countries have announced plans to make their asylum policies even more restrictive. If more and more countries seal their borders, the refugees will head to wherever the channels are still open – to countries like Germany.
3. Would defining other Balkan states as safe countries of origin be a solution? If you look at the approval procedure and its outcomes, you will find that hardly anyone from Albania or Kosovo, for example, is being accepted as an asylum seeker. There is no current evidence of war or systematic persecution in these countries. Ultimately you have to ask why they are not also being recognized as safe countries of origin.
4. How many refugees can be integrated into the German labor market? Asylum seekers understandably face significant obstacles when entering the labor market. The vast majority do not speak German, which means they must first learn the language – and some asylum seekers, especially those from the Arabic-speaking world, are not even familiar with Latin alphabet. Then there is the issue that some asylum seekers have health restrictions: for example, psychological disturbances resulting from civil war. This makes integration very difficult. And although employment has increased among the nationalities to which most asylum seekers belong, the number of unemployed individuals has increased even more.
5. The distinction between those who are entitled to asylum and those who are merely economic migrants is heavily debated in the current sociopolitical climate. Do the refugee acceptance criteria need to be reworked? I think we basically need to distinguish certain facts. Germany is a country of immigration, and for immigration we have certain rules. With regard to the labor force, we are completely open to workers from other EU countries. For migrants from third-world countries, we have the EU Blue Card. In principle, asylum for refugees is not intended to facilitate permanent immigration; rather, it is a temporary humanitarian aid and as such it should be treated that way. If there are people among the asylum seekers who can bring specific skills that fit the EU Blue Card scheme, the asylum procedure can be terminated right away, strictly speaking, and that individual can be given a work permit. But it is unlikely that many people fit such criteria. We can also offer vocational training to young people, but it needs to be made clear that such a plan is only designed for temporary migration – and this is where things get tricky.

Interview by Erich Wittenberg



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