A TALE OF TWO GERMANIES

Wilkommenskultur and the rise of right-wing populism

A travel report for the **Schwarzkopf Foundation** by
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1. Introduction

Right-wing populist parties seem to be raising all over Europe, from France's Front National to Hungary's Jobbik, the Sweden Democrats, Austria's FPÖ or even Britain's UKIP. Right-wing populist parties (*Rechtspopulisten*) differ from the traditional right-wing extremists or *Rechtsextremisten* (like the German NPD) in their willingness to play by the democratic rules and their use of populist strategies to appeal to a wide coalition of voters (Melzer, 2016). This strategy is based on the appeal to *the People,* an anti-establishment rhetoric and a "we" against "the other" narrative, usually directed against foreign migrants. This brief definition hides a wide variety of political parties all over Europe: some are economic protectionists, some are liberals; some represent more traditional conservative values, some are located far-right, indeed bordering extremism. But they all share their rejection of European integration and their opposition to immigration, especially the one coming from Asia and Africa.

The rise of European far right parties from its traditional, very conservative but relative small base to a populist strategy and electoral double digits has been a long process. In the last decade it has been fueled by the effects of the economic crisis: too much austerity was the argument for some countries (as in the case of Greece's Golden Dawn), too much European solidarity for others (the Brexit movement in the UK). In the last couple of years, however, another issue has stormed into the European agenda, acquiring major importance in these parties' discourse: the migrant crisis. Thousands of people risked their lives (and still do) to reach Europe. Here, many countries rejected to take responsibility for these people, and those who did are facing enormous political turmoil and many are backing off. On the top of that, major terrorist attacks in cities like Paris or Brussels has helped reinforce the narrative that Europe find itself at war and that the arrival of refugees[1] is making us less safe. Right-wing populists not only profit electorally from this situation: some of their ideas may be becoming the new consensus.

Germany, maybe the most important political center of Europe and by far the European country with the largest number of refugees in its territory is seeing how some sectors of

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[1] I am aware of the differences of legal status and social treatment that the words "refugees" and "migrants" imply. Nevertheless, since the status of the people arriving to Germany is not clear until their application is resolved, and to avoid repetition, I will be using both words interchangeably in this report.

the population mobilize against this massive reception of foreigners. The PEGIDA movement demonstrates in Dresden on Mondays against the "islamization" of Europe. The governing Big Coalition almost falls apart over the differences about refugee policy. The attacks to refugee centers increase. Finally, this summer the country suffered a string of terrorist attacks, some of which were carried out by asylum seekers. In the center of this hurricane, a right-wing populist party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), is making big electoral winnings.

1.1 Research goals

With this journey I intended to experience first-hand the situation in Germany regarding the reception of hundreds of thousands of refugees, the efforts for their integration and the reaction of the German society, especially the rise of anti-migration forces like the AfD, but also the solidarity movement that led thousands of people all over the country to engage in helping the newcomers. This goal is rooted in my interest on German society but especially in my understanding of the refugee crisis as an European issue that can only be addressed with joint European efforts and the evidence that the rise of anti-migrant and highly anti-liberal populism is a European-wide phenomenon (indeed, even transatlantic) that threats the values -which some of us would like to call European- of solidarity and openness to the world, and hinders the chances of properly and humanly address the

Me in Munich

aforementioned migrant crisis. The positions I express in this report are my own and, because of that, are personal and subjective.

1.2 Preparations for the trip

My preparation for the research started by reading beforehand about the topics of study. Due to my studies of political science and interest on the matter, I had read already quite a lot, but I lacked most of the specific country context. So I tried to find it in international

and German media (with the intention of refreshing my German language skills as well). I will give a brief overview of the background I worked in before the trip (complemented during the elaboration of this report), to introduce each of the issues I discuss. Of course, news and public debate about my topics would continue to be an important part of the investigation once the trip started, keeping an eye on local news as well national newspapers and TV broadcasters (here the android app of Tagesschau.de is to be praised).
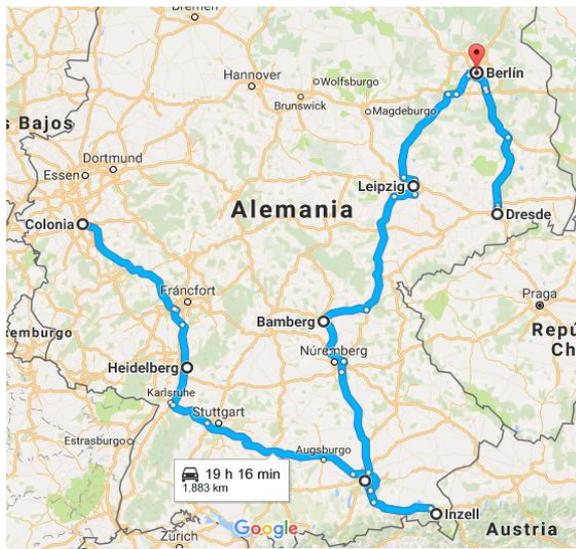
Another part of my approach was trying to get closer to the protagonists. I tried to contact organizations working with refugees, with irregular success, although I reckoned I could manage to meet more of these people, along with some refugees once I am on the field. In order to get in touch also with sectors of the emerging right-wing, I went through official websites of the AfD and followed several Facebook groups such as Alternative für Deutschland Landesverband Berlin - AfD Berlin, Alternative für Deutschland / AfD Sachsen and from other German regions, as well as the groups of the youth organization of the AfD, the Junge Alternative (again, from each of the regions of interest), which I figured could have less "official" contents and be more accessible to me. Through these groups I tried to contact representatives of the party, obtaining no response. Therefore, I figured I would try to contact members or sympathizers once in place. Along with this contacts, my intention was to discuss the issues with the ordinary people I meet during the trip, which were mainly, but not exclusively, young people and students.

1.3 The route

The trip had a total duration of twenty-four days, from the 13th July to the 5th August of 2016. I traveled more than 1800 km through Germany, mainly by bus but also some occasional hitchhiking, experiencing the country's world famous high-speed *Autobahnen.* I started in the west, in the ancient roman city of Cologne and then head south to Heidelberg, were I stayed in a nearby village in the marvelous Neckar valley. Then I went to Munich, were I lived days of real tension following a terrorist attack in the city. From there I went for a day to a friend's house in Inzell, close to the Austrian border, were I actually (and unexpectedly) got to visit a refugee center. Back to the capital I started heading north, stopping shortly in Bamberg, where I hold interesting conversations with the locals expressing their concern with the recent attacks in the region. Then I hitchhiked to Leipzig, crossing the old border between the two Germanies. From there I went to the Berlin, the *Hauptstadt,* the place with the biggest concentration

of refugees and with a dynamic and engaged volunteering community, just as the electoral campaign for the regional elections of September was launched. From there, I went to Dresden on a long day trip, just on time to watch the sadly famous PEGIDA's *Abendspaziergang* against the "Islamization of Europe". Back in Berlin, on Friday the 5th I took a flight back home, with my rucksack full of experiences and things to reflect on.

I tried here to give a brief overview of my route because I intend to report my findings following a thematic structure rather than a chronological one. I will divide the subsequent part of this document according to the two main topics of my research (which are, of course, intertwined): refugee crisis and right-wing populism, with an extra section to address the violent attacks that took place in south Germany when I was on the country. That means I will not be reporting the facts in chronological order or by destination, but rather I will refer to encounters, experiences and situations that happened during the trip whenever they fit the discussion, of course providing the spatial context. That means I will be referring almost exclusively to experiences regarding my topic, which of course does not mean that I did not try to enjoy other parts of travelling as well: how to forget the black walls of the kölner Dom, the magnificent Neckar valley, the impressive Dachau concentration camp or the colorful *Kieze* of Berlin, as well as the *Kölsch,* the *Spätzle*, the *Bamberger Rauchbier* or the delicious Arabic food of Neukölln in Berlin. All that would be plenty enough for another report.

The route

2. Germany: a field research

2.1 *Flüchtlingspolitik:* refugee crisis and asylum policies

Germany is the European country with the biggest number of refugees living in its territory. Only in 2015, more than 1 million people came to the country, and for 2016 the

authorities are expecting about 350.000 more (IOM, 2016). Most of them come from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, but also from Somalia and Eritrea, and even from Maghreb and East European countries. Most of them arrived through Greece and the Balkan route, when the German government announced that it would not apply the European Dublin regulation to Syrians fleeing the civil war[2]. Afterwards, the route was suspended due to countries like Hungary or Croatia closing their borders, but thousands of people still risk their lives in the Mediterranean to get to Europe.

Once a potential asylum seeker is registered in Germany, they are assigned a residence, normally the so-called *Flüchtlingsheim* (refugee camps), which in the case of the big emergency shelters like Tempelhof in Berlin can host up to more than a thousand people. There, they wait for their application to be processed while they have to fill a lot of paperwork (in often incomprehensible German) and go through one or more tough interviews about the reasons that led them to flee and seek asylum. The result can take months, and the chance of success depends on personal and familiar circumstances, the existence of persecution and, strongly, on the country of origin (for some applicants, like those coming from north Africa or East Europe is really unlikely to get asylum this way). If the application is accepted, the person can receive a residence permit for one to three years (extendible), depending on the degree of protection granted (FOMR, n.d.).

While they wait for the procedure and once it is favorably resolved, the applicants get a small assignment of money from the employment office, and engage in training programs and language courses, with the intention to integrate them as soon as possible in the society and the labor market.

During my trip, I encountered the reality of the people seeking asylum, as well as of the volunteers that were working with them. My first stop was Cologne, a city that went through difficult times due to the sexual harassments that took place during the New Year's Eve of 2016 in the city center. The event was from the beginning surrounded by uncertainty and, despite the initial speculations about the perpetrators being asylum seekers proved to be misguided, the fact that they were of "Arab or North African

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[2] The Dublin regulation (currently Dublin III) states that each individual asylum application is only examined by one Member State of the EU, the one in which the asylum seeker was taken his fingerprints for the first time. Was the German government did is to accept these applications as well, agreeing to the transfer with the "responsible" member state.

appearance" (Deutsche Welle, 2016) fueled the rage of those critics with the governments asylum policy.

To that city I arrived seven months later, wondering if the welcoming culture was affected by those events. My contact there was Jochen, a long-time volunteer of the organization City of Hope Cologne, which had worked attending refugees arriving to train and bus stations. The flow of newcomers had slowed down dramatically, he related, so the organization was focusing now in helping the refugees already in Cologne. That involved helping them getting places to live, furniture and basics and, most importantly, contacts and social relations in their new home. That included personal *Patenschaften,* connecting Cologne citizens with refugees. The citizens I got to meet seemed to be proud of the welcoming culture of their city towards the refugees, despite the effect New Year's Eve events, which some referred to as misinformed. Unfortunately, I did not manage to meet the other part, citizens not willing to welcome those newcomers and concerned with the high number of foreigners. The existence of this "other Cologne" is clear if we look at the incidents against refugees, like the case of one small refugee shelter in the south of Cologne, next to where I was living, that was intentionally burned some weeks ago - reference in the press, for instance, in Die Zeit, (2016)-.

I also tried to visit some refugee centers myself. In Munich I went to the Bayernkaserne *Erstaufnahmeeinrichtung*, unfortunately I was not allowed in without a citation, but I managed to speak with a worker coming out, a German woman in her fifties, who told

A family with all they could carry at a train station in Cologne

me she had been working there for more than a year as social worker. She said the center worked as a transition shelter, from where the residents were transferred to other, smaller places. Most of the residents she worked with were unaccompanied minors, which actually constitute an important part of the refugees arriving to Germany.

Once I had learnt that I could not just show up at a refugee center without notification, I decided to try again in Berlin, with more preparation. I signed up for a voluntary shift in the Tempelhof Notunterkunft, a huge refugee shelter located in the hangars of the old

Tempelhof Airport, now turned into a popular park. There, I worked for a day in the *Kleiderkammer,* the place where clothes coming from donations are distributed to the residents. Due to the nature of the work (standing behind a desk, looking for the clothes, with a limited time to treat each person) I could not hold substantive conversation with the refugees, but I could have a glance of the facilities and speak with volunteers. The residents sleep in rooms made out of containers with eight to twelve beds. The number of people coming to pick up clothes was, in proportion, not very high. The most experienced volunteers related that in winter, when more clothes were needed, they had many more shifts and volunteers. Now, the rhythm of arrival of residents has decreased, and "merely" around 1.300 people were living there, for almost 3.000 at the peak of the refugee crisis.

Most of the residents were male young adults travelling alone (having left wife and children waiting behind in many cases) and families with children, mostly from Syria and Iraq, but (surprisingly for me) also many from Central Asia and the Caucasus. In the short exchanges I had with them, I tried to avoid asking delicate questions about what they had lived through in their countries, but sometimes it just came out, like once an old Yazidi man from Iraq started crying silently while relating the murder of his family by ISIS. Maybe that was the moment I most clearly realized the magnitude of what is happening and our moral obligation to these human beings.

Other day I took a shift in the emergency shelter of the Berliner Stadtmission, another big refugee center managed by the protestant church. I worked in the kitchen distributing the food that came already cooked. I found a similar situation there, although the center was smaller. The volunteers also related how the rhythm of arrival had decreased, and so did the number of volunteers, probably as the public attention had shift from the humanitarian emergency to the more long-term debates about integration. After finishing the shift, I got to talk outside with a couple of young residents, although only briefly, since after 10 PM they have to be back inside the shelter and nobody except the residents and workers can stay in, a rule they -understandably- complained largely about. They were two men from the north Syrian city of Hasaka. They had arrived to Berlin (separately) this year, and they were waiting for the processing of their asylum application. Overall they liked Berlin and they found the shelter OK, although they complained about the big amount of people they had to sleep with. But their main concern was the amount of bureaucracy they had to fill, including hours of queuing and, sometimes, having to speak with only-German-speaking officials.

I also got to discover a refugee center where I was not expecting one. It was in the small village of Inzell, a one-hour drive in the south of Munich, were I had gone to visit a friend and enjoy the landscapes. It was a big house next to the road, and served as home for around 40 people, most of them were from Afghanistan and also from Africa. Later I read that nationality is one of the criteria for distributing refugees between the Länder. I imagined that the life of a refugee in a tiny village in the south of Bavaria had to be very different that of those living in a big city. Asked about that, two young African mothers sitting with their small children in the front yard recognized that life could be sometimes boring, but that they had to get used to it and, after all, living in the countryside was not that bad for the children. In Berlin I asked other refugees whether they would like to live in a place like that and they all said they would not (although I imagine it is harder for a young man travelling alone that for a mother or a family).

Flyer looking for volunteers in Berlin

Apart from those visits, I got to meet many asylum seekers during the trip. Like Khalid from Damascus, who taught kick-boxing in Syria and now had moved to Cologne with his family. Or Mansour, Afghan student of archeology that was learning the language in Leipzig, hoping to resume his studies in Germany. Or Emad, a licensed architect from Aleppo, with whom I shared delicious Syrian dishes in Neukölln, the center of the Arab community in Berlin. His history resembled that I had read about or seen on television so often. He arrived to Germany after risking his life in a boat to get to the Greek islands, then crossing the Balkan route by car, train and foot, avoiding border patrols and paying smugglers. Once in Germany, he rushed to Berlin in order to register there[3]. He had travelled alone, but many of his friends from Aleppo were already in Germany, some even in Berlin. He lived in a refugee center but now, thanks to the help of organizations like Refugees Welcome and Start with a Friend, he was living in a flat (a *WG,* a concept that was new for both of us, but very popular in Germany) with German young people. He was learning German and preparing to start an internship. Maybe he was the shining face of the integration process, but even so, he still had left his parents and sister in the

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[3] If they register in Berlin they have more chance to be able to stay there, whereas if they register in Munich they are likely to enter the distribution system, with the possibility of an unappealing destination.

besieged and heavily bombed Aleppo. Even if I try, I cannot imagine to live with that kind of fear.

2.2 *Rechtspopulismus:* the growth of right-wing populism

Europe is not at all unfamiliar with parties right to the Cristian-democratic traditional parties. They had been popular in the 90s and 2000s, with a strong message against immigration. But nowadays they are living a renaissance. They held power in countries like Hungary or Poland, or are very close to it, like Austria's FPÖ or even France's Front National. In many other places, they are at least a worrying perspective. But perhaps the most worrying part is that some of their ideas, once seen as fringe, now are part of the mainstream political discourse. That help explain how the UKIP, with virtually no representation in the Chamber of Commons, managed to push the UK to vote for the Brexit, or how the governments of many countries adopted such a tough approach to the migrant crisis. In times of humanitarian emergency and of great difficulties for the European project, this revival of nationalism and xenophobia, even if anticipated, poses a great danger.[4]

In Germany, a country with obvious historical suspicions towards far-right, had skip even the hard times of the reunification without a powerful far-right party, other than the NPD. That space came recently to be filled by the Alternative for Germany or AfD. It is a party founded in 2013, mainly as an Anti-Euro party. It already got seven percent of the vote in 2014 European Parliament elections, but the refugee crisis and a change on the party's leadership shifted the attention of the party towards anti-immigration. The rhetoric is

classically populistic: a corrupt elite had betrayed the country and handed it to European bureaucrats, and bring refugees in giving them generous social benefits following the liberal, cosmopolitan, politically correct view. From only 4,7% of the votes, recent polls (July-August) predict more than 10% of the vote for the national

A house in Heidelberg showing German flags

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[4] A good summary of the state of right-wing parties in Europe can be found in (Aisch, Pearce, & Rousseau, 2016)

parliamentary election, which has to take place next year (Wahlrecht.de, n.d.)[5] In the most recent regional election, AfD reached 15% in Baden-Württemberg or even 24% in Sachsen-Anhalt, one of the eastern old states, where the AfD is stronger.

I already commented how I lived in Cologne a few blocks away from a small, recently burned refugee center. That was one of the attacks that have been happening in Germany since refugees started to be settled in high numbers. Parallel to the *Willkommenskultur,* a movement to reject refugees, and foreigners in general, has been raising in the country. Everybody I met had an opinion about this situation, but it was difficult to find somebody not against it. I do not take that as proof of non-importance, but rather, as a proof of isolated these "two Germanies" -indeed, these two worlds- are from each other, how difficult is to break the barriers between social networks. Even so, I tried to set my prejudices aside and try to look at the issue from every perspective.

During my trip, it was much easier to find with migrant's rights activists or, at the very least, sympathizers than to meet people against them. In Cologne I stayed with an activist and I met some of his co-workers. They related that, although they thought Cologne was an overall welcoming city -in comparative terms- towards refugees, there were reasons for concern, in the form of far-right demonstrations -usually contested by counter-demonstrations- and racist attacks, either in the form of physical or verbal violence. From Khalid I learned that he and some of his Syrian friends had suffered racist comments in the street, although not on a regular basis, at least sometimes. He could not say whether that situation worsened after New Year's Eve, but my German partners criticized the misinformation and the state of public rage that followed those days, not condoning, of course, those unjustifiable acts. They recognized to be concern by the rise of Alternative for Deutschland in the polls -now around 10%-, in a state that is a traditional stronghold of the Left. Next year, only months before the general election, North Rhine-Westphalia will test the strength of the rising populist party.

Precisely afterwards I headed south to visit Baden-Württemberg, a state where the AfD got 15 percent of the vote some months ago, even beating the historic *Volkspartei* SPD. For the students in the old and prestigious university of Heidelberg, that was a real shock. I arrived at the end of the teaching period, and the students were anxious about their exams

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[5] The electoral support for the AfD shown by the polls has decreased recently from the 15% nationwide predicted some months ago. That is seen as effect of the Brexit and of the internal disputes of the party.

and final papers, but I managed to convince three students to take a coffee with me during the study break. Two of them studied political science and one sociology, so they were fairly interested in politics (a lucky shot, because in what may had been a miscalculation I had gone to the general library and not to the PS faculty).

We discussed the political evolution in Germany, and from the beginning was clear that their opinion about the right-wing movement was negative. Two of them (a man and a woman in their twenties) came from Heidelberg or the surroundings, and the remaining woman (around the same age) came from a village in neighboring Rhineland-Palatinate, where state elections were hold at the same time, with more than 12 percent of the vote for the AfD (third party as well). They all were worried about this, and thought that it will get worse before the general election. Asked about the relation between the *Flüchtlingspolitik* and the rise of the populists, they recognized it played a central role in AfD's strategy, but pointed out the recurring use of misinformation or direct lies about it. Asked about the situation here in Baden-Württemberg, where an unusual CDU-Green coalition was formed to allow a government without the AfD, the answer was that it was the best of all the bad possibilities, although it forms a more conservative government that they would have wanted. Finally, I was also interested in whether they knew in their social circles somebody with the profile of an AfD voter. They recognized that among their friends or in the university they did not personally know anybody, but they were aware that there are many college students in the party's base. But two out of three said they had people with this profile among their relatives or older people they knew. Especially the woman coming from the countryside said it was not unusual there to hear mildly or openly racist comments or allegations against refugees.

AfD electoral posters in Berlin

My first personal contact with what we could call "other side of the *Willkommenskultur*" took place in Munich, in the beautiful English Gardens, where I met Klaus and Franz, two German men in their sixties (or at least retired) that were spending the evening sitting on a bench. I approached them and asked whether I could ask some questions and, despite

my difficulties with what I guess were traces of Bavarian dialect in the *Hochdeutsch* they were kindly trying to speak to me, the conversation went on. After a while I told them about the goal of my trip and asked their opinion about the migrant crisis situation. They said to understand the need in which those people found themselves, but they argue that Germany did not have the capability to take so many people in (there they actually disagreed on whether that limit had already been reached or it will be at some indeterminate point).

They did not show open racism but they did recall how much the country and the city had changed in the last years due to the arrival of foreigners, referring to issues of security. Asked about their opinion of the AfD and the whole right-wing turn, they did not completely like the discourse of the party and (interestingly) they related it with what they described as "East Germany particularities" (in a free translation). They did not see the party becoming strong here in Bavaria and, although they described themselves as not politically interested, they recognized they usually had vote for the CSU and that its leader, Horst Seehofer, is the one whose position is closer to theirs. I was aware of the disputes between CDU and CSU about the refugee policy, and that made me reflect on the role of the CSU as contention for the growth of the AfD in Bavaria, and whether it does it through the adoption of some of AfD stances[6].

Some days later, I arrived to Leipzig, which meant I set foot for the first time in the old East Germany, where the support for the AfD is higher (got 24 percent in Saxony-Anhalt, they could get 20 percent in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania). Moreover, in Saxony the neo-nazis of the NPD are always around the necessary limit of five percent and the attacks against foreigners and refugees are sadly usual (Popp, 2016). In Leipzig, I felt again the separation between those two societies. I was hosted by Micha, a phylosophy student and couchsurfer. In discussions with him and his roomates (all of them borned in other federal states) about the topic, they recognized that, although rage against migrants is a hot topic in the news, is not easy to see it in their social circles. They pointed out that right-wing ideas are more deeply rooted in the countryside, whereas Leipzig is an overall more progressive city, in a fast process of gentrification.

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[6] It is important to note that this conversation took place before the gun attack in Munich on 23/07, to which I will be referring in the next section.

Some days after I arrived to Berlin, just by the start of the electoral campaign for the city election in september. I spoke with several people my age about the topic of right-wing populism, as well as with the volunteers I met at the refugee shelters. As expected, in all cases their opinion was negative, and some of them said to have attended counter-demonstrations against right-wing in the last months. Not wanting to leave the country without having heard at least a voice of the other side, I wrote some people in the Junge Alternative Facebook group to try to get somebody to speak to me about the topic. I only got one affirmative answer, so I headed to Steglitz, in the south of the city, to meet with Jonas, a 28 year old master student of Law, who did not formed part of the AfD structure in Berlin but was a sympathizer and regular participant on its events.

He related that he had been an occasional voter of the CDU, but his political engagement started with the rise of the AfD. He argued that they were the only ones speaking *the truth* about the situation in the country. Although he was not in principle against the idea of Europe, he supported the parties critic stance on the EU, due to the power hold by non-elected bureaucrats, the freeriding from states in south and east Europe and the failling migrant policy. When we spoke about the refugee crisis, he made efforts not to make any racist comments, while rejecting the hosting of mass numbers of refugees on economic and social service issues ("first solve our own problems"), although he refered as well to

Agressive flyer found in Berlin against the AfD

security problems and the alleged incompatibility of islam and "european values", pointing out as well that Germany should help facilitating a solution to the problems in the countries of origin. Overall, he matched the preconciebed idea I had about young, college-educated AfD supporters, whose profile I imagine is different from that of older rural voters.

From Berlin I went on a day trip to Dresden. I could have gone from Leipzig more efficiently, but I wanted to visit the city on Monday for a reason: assisting the Monday demonstration of the movement "against the islamization of the West", PEGIDA. The perspective of a few hundred people demonstrating surrounded by "patriotic" flags and message against the refugees was not very appealing, but an interesting experience

nonetheless. The structure of the event was curious, with speakers to encourage the crowd and then a short walk, with the demonstrators repeatedly being faced by people holding anti-racist messages. During that moments I tried to stay at a distance but the tension was never uncontainable (I guess it has become familiar for the people in the city). I knew the relation between PEGIDA and the AfD is complicated, with an obvious coincidence in many supporters, attempts from the traditional parties and media to equal them and efforts by the AfD direction to differentiate themselves from PEGIDA, and I could not see or hear messages regarding AfD, although it was clear it represents at least part of those people's views. Overall it was an experience. I never thought I would get to hear the "wir sind das Volk" in the street of Germany in person. History is indeed twisted.

2.3 *Terrorismus:* the panic of a nation

During my stay in Germany, a string of violent attacks took place in the south of the country, where I was travelling. Moreover, I was in Munich hours before the attack, but luckily that day I had decided to visit my friend in the mountains, as I referred before. Nevertheless, my phone did not stop ringing that day, with messages of people who knew I was there, asking if I was OK. My family even recommend me to finish the trip right there. It is an example of the understandable yet excessive panic that these kind of attacks generate, which in many cases is precisely their goal. Once I had overcome the impression on the news coming from Munich, I resolved to pay attention to the way the country and the people react to those attacks.

For starters, in the media all the attacks (Würzburg, Ansbach, Reutlingen, Munich) were being treated together as "Islamic terrorist attacks", and only in the more serious media and after a quiet reading it was clarified, for example, that the attacker in Munich had no relation with ISIS or no political motivation whatsoever. It did not matter, in the generalized media (especially the newspapers sold in supermarkets) and in the public this idea of "Islamic fundamentalist attack" was installed. That was the feeling I perceived when I returned to Munich and, in a city center guarded by heavily armed police, exchanged a few words with a group of German middle-aged women that were talking about the attack of the previous day. Although they were supporters of the policy of hosting refugees, they said, they were scared.

This connection that they almost naturally did between the attack and the refugees, and the fact that at least two of the attackers of the last weeks were asylum seekers, made me think that, whether that connection is justified or not, this could be an inflexion point in the country's attitude towards refugees, of the kind the New Year's Eve events were. Although the mostly progressive students and volunteers I met later vigorously rejected that relation, it did come up with in my conversation with the AfD supporter. He pointed out that "not all the refugees are potential terrorists, but some of them may, and we should not take that risk".

Facebook post in the Junge Alternative group reacting to the attacks in Germany and mocking the "political correctness"

3. Difficulties and challenges

The first problem I had was not been able to contact with academics or experts on the matter prior to my trip. I should have planned better and started before. Furthermore, the dates I travelled made it more difficult, since many people take their summer vacations then.

Meeting people eager to speak about these topics was extremely easy. But it was not that easy to find people against the refugee policy and supporters of the right-wing. As a consequence, I saw mostly one side of the situation and, besides, most of my references of the AfD atmosphere ended up coming from its opponents (and from the press).

Finally, the unfortunate anecdote of the trip happened at the end, when I forgot my phone in a café in a Kreuzberg café in Berlin, and when I came back short after it was gone. I got very irritated with myself, but all things consider, I can consider myself lucky that that was the only real problem I had. The real pain was losing most of the pictures I had made during the trip, although I could save the ones I had sent or the ones made with other people's phones.

4. Conclusion

This trip was a very enriching experience. I got to witness firsthand the reality of the people trying to find a new and safe home in Germany and of the people mobilizing to help them. It convinced me of the moral obligation that we, as Europeans, have to host these people. Despite all the difficulties, the problems and the things that can be done better, I think Germans can be proud of what they are doing, and other nations should be ashamed not to follow that lead.

That commitment with the refugees is having a high political cost for the government and the country. A part of the German society has a growing aversion to the current *Flüchtlingspolitik,* which helps explain the rise of xenophobic forces. The populists use it, fueling the frustrations and prejudices of the voters with exaggerations and manipulations. It is not a German phenomenon, but a European one. The rise of anti-european populists is a threat to the ideal of a united Europe based on values of human rights and solidarity. But the biggest threat would be, as we saw recently in the UK, that we let that messages of xenophobia and nationalism become accepted and generalize, with mainstream political parties adopting them.

5. Acknowledgments

6. References

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