

This month we did an interview with Andrea Johlige, member of Brandenburg state parliament.

Alexander Klotzovski: Andrea, you are MP of Die Linke; what is your policy area?

Andrea Johlige: Officially I am speaker for asylum-, refugee-, foreigner-, and migration policy and for a tolerant Brandenburg. This comprises the whole spectrum of migration and integration issues as well as antifascist and antiracist policy.

Alexander: Over the past year, many refugees arrived in Brandenburg and Germany as a whole. What is your recollection of this highly emotional time?

Andrea: It was an intense period of time indeed. Nobody had really been prepared for the situation we found ourselves in. Anyone familiar with the data knew the number of refugees was going to rise, if not as massively. It was amazing witnessing many people join in to help. Who would have thought of all these small local groups assisting new-comers during their arrival, language learning, application for asylum, work and housing; in all questions of life, big and small. Civil society proved what it can do. There were employees of public authorities working night and day. Last summer and autumn, we were mainly concerned with providing shelter. The bureaucracy, normally accused of moving slowly, did marvelously and hence no one had to spend winter in tents in Brandenburg. It only worked because we worked together. Firms of the social sector sometimes were told they had to run a new reception center due to open the next day. This wouldn't have worked without active staff who did their jobs without regard to their working hours. Many more were involved: Firms, schools and kindergartens, security agencies, sport clubs... It was great; even as a politician it is rare experiencing this. I spend much time in the local communities trying to solve local problems via the state legislature. The time belonged to those who acted bravely. I wonder how we managed. Seriously, I am proud how Brandenburg coped and I believe it somewhat changed this country, because so many people got to know each other during their days of activism.

Alexander: Besides those who wanted to foster "Welcome Culture", some opposed it, right?

Andrea: Indeed, this was the second issue everyone was concerned with last year. There were community meetings where emotions, worries and insecurity came to boiling point and where we always tried to reassure people and to do away with their prejudices. There also were many protests of racists and xenophobes where our party and civil society took a firm stand. There were attacks on refugees, their camps and on those friendly to them. My own office in Nauen was attacked several times; glass was broken and windows defaced. Refugees had an especially grim time in Nauen and saw a gym, prepared to house some of them, burn down. Fire, too, was set to the cars of two local councilmen of Die Linke. The strengthening of the right-wing movement, of PeGiDa and AfD will remain a critical issue for some time.

Alexander: Eisenhüttenstadt is home to Brandenburg's central reception center. What is the situation like there?

Andrea: Currently, very few refugees arrive in Germany. That does not mean fewer people actually try to get to Europe. The dirty deal with Turkey and the closure of the Balkans simply prevent them from getting here. European policy is a tacit agreement to let them die, which is happening – in the Mediterranean Sea and elsewhere. Europe relies on Greece and Italy to carry the load of the crisis. German media ignore it but Italy's capacities are absolutely

overstretched. They abandoned Greece and now they abandon Italy. In Brandenburg 3500 places in reception centers are empty. That gives us time to consolidate.

Alexander: Is it possible to predict arrivals will stay this low for longer or do you expect the backlog to create some sudden eruption?

Andrea: I do not think we will again see anything on the scale of autumn 2015. We are much better prepared, more capacities have been built up to house, feed and clothe refugees. Even if we were to repeat the 2015 peak we would be able to cope much better. Similarly, the EU's structures are in much better shape. Therefore, I do not believe numbers will remain as low because Italy and Greece are already straining. Distribution across EU countries will probably happen much more orderly.

Alexander: A shipwreck and 700 dead bodies have been found in the Mediterranean during the last weeks. What can be done in Brandenburg to prevent further bloodshed?

Andrea: That is the price of a restrictive European refugee policy. Routes to safety become more dangerous and more people get killed. People need opportunities to live wherever they are from. This is what we call peaceful conflict resolution. The most important reason for people to flee home is war. Additionally, major corporations need to be prevented from taking away the livelihoods of people, from depleting marine resources, from buying their land and so on. That means we need a form of development aid that strengthens economies in the long run. The climate change needs to be stopped because it too messes with the livelihoods of many people. Brandenburg only has limited powers to act; those policy areas are German federal or EU-prerogative. We are in a role of responding to decisions from higher up and leeway is typically small. For example, Bodo Ramelow, prime minister of Thuringia offered to accept refugees from Idomeni who had lived in a muddy camp for months. The federal government objected. That also shows we have given up the strategy of "We will manage" for "Others will manage". Germany does not man up to its responsibilities in Europe and lets Italy and Greece carry the heaviest load.

Alexander: We have been registering rising numbers of refugees from Russia. Are you familiar with this topic?

Andrea: I feel like they are refugees who simply make it to Germany which creates the impression they are coming in larger numbers.

Alexander: Do you really think they pose a potential threat like the media suggest?

Andrea: I do not think refugees are generally good people; just like locals. Usually, they are not more dangerous than Germans are, but some commit crimes that should be punished. Statistically, it is not proven that crime bumps close to refugee centers. Within camps, conflicts are rife because many people live on a crowded space for a long time. And the number of assaults on refugee centers from outside increases. Nevertheless, work can be done to curb the psychological stress associated with their housing conditions and with awaiting decision on your asylum application. We need to help them building their lives in Germany from the beginning. If it were up to me, everyone would take German classes and could work immediately after arrival. That would resolve much of the problem.

Alexander: What are your policy proposals you are currently working on?

Andrea: We were mainly working on an amendment to Brandenburg's refugee reception law. It means we improved requirements for housing refugees. It strengthens the role of social work and improves its quality. We laid the groundwork for introducing an electronic health insurance card for refugees to get access to health services. In the coming months it will be up to us to implement the new federal integration act. This will be a struggle, since Die Linke objects to most parts of it. We will try to find grey areas in which to bend the law in favor of refugees. Again, we will be concerned with integrating people into education and the labor market.

Alexander: Is there anything other states can learn from Brandenburg's experience? Anything we need to improve upon?

Andrea: Yes, for example we are the only ones who improved living conditions for refugees despite rising numbers. At the moment, we prepare a project to improve the lot of people with disabilities. Due to the home countries' situation and the people's migration many refugees require special care. Often, they themselves are not aware of their entitlements. The language barrier with deaf people does not help. Sign language differs between German and Arabic. We want to develop feasible solutions which other states and federal authorities are already keen on. Integration in General is a big issue and will remain so in the coming years. We have not had anything like the current challenges. Hence, solving tricky problems on a daily basis requires loads of creativity. I believe we are managing quite well on a local level together with many active people.

Alexander: Thank you!