

# Building on Common Ground: Communicative Recommendations for Refugee Work in Germany



More in  
Common

## **ABOUT MORE IN COMMON**

More in Common is an international initiative set up in 2017 to build societies and communities that are stronger, more united, and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarization and social division. We work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media, and government to connect people across lines of division. More in Common's teams in Germany, France, Poland, the United Kingdom, and the United States work together and share a commitment to advancing our mission.

## **AUTHORS**

Jérémie Gagné  
Sarah Wohlfeld

## **LEGAL DISCLOSURE**

**More in Common e. V.** is registered at Amtsgericht Charlottenburg (VR 36992 B)  
[www.moreincommon.com](http://www.moreincommon.com) | [deutschland@moreincommon.com](mailto:deutschland@moreincommon.com)  
Address: More in Common e. V., Gipsstraße 3, 10119 Berlin, Germany  
Director: Laura-Kristine Krause

Design and Graphics: TAU GmbH, Berlin  
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## OUR GOAL IS TO HELP SHAPE WELCOMING CONCEPTS AND COMMUNICATION THAT UNITE

Over the last decade, German society has engaged in several phases of large-scale refugee arrival. After around 1.2 million asylum seekers were registered in 2015/2016<sup>1</sup> (with Syrians and Afghans being the largest groups), the Russian war against Ukraine has recently driven the need for shelter in Germany to similar dimensions.<sup>2</sup> Along the way, German society has lived through very different experiences. On the one hand, we have seen remarkable civic engagement – most accurately coined in the term *Willkommenskultur*. On the other hand, the 2015/2016 situation evolved into toxic dynamics of polarization and aggression within society, leading to the establishment of a right-wing populist party in parliament, and most shockingly to acts of brutal violence.<sup>3</sup> Questions of refugee intake have therefore been a delicate matter – and while intake from Ukraine so far seems to have less of an impact on German society, it makes sense to watch the situation closely.

As our mission at More in Common is to strengthen cohesion across dividing lines, we have followed refugee-related issues throughout our work. Via our social-psychological research approach that helps us understand people's attitudes along their deep-seated norms and core beliefs<sup>4</sup>, we monitor risks for division, but also identify uniting potentials. Our goal is to help relevant actors like NGOs, state and civic institutions, as well as philanthropy engaged in the refugee space find concepts and communication for (new) avenues of welcome that address both Germans' potential readiness for help and their ambivalent feelings and needs.

With this ambition in mind, we set out in 2022, amidst the Ukraine situation, to use the moment and learn from people's perceptions of refugee intake: We explored how they have been viewing current events in comparison to former intake phases, how the new situation may impact their existing refugee-related attitudes, what welcoming aspects have worked well or less well, and how acquired experience may be used to inform future welcoming efforts in different contexts. In concrete terms, this briefing report draws insights and recommendations from the following research activities:

- **Quantitative research** in May and July 2022 to monitor the societal situation (online-panel surveys with 2,000 adult German residents by YouGov), using the prism of six social-psychological population segments we identified in 2019.<sup>5</sup>
- **A total of three qualitative focus groups** in November 2022 to further explore intake-related attitudes, norms and needs (in cooperation with Kantar). To cover people with different personal stances towards refugee intake and welcoming work, we held separate conversations with residents already engaged, potentially willing to engage, and those so far unwilling to engage in welcoming activities themselves.

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1 Information as available online via the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees: [www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Statistik/BundesamtinZahlen/bundesamt-in-zahlen-2016.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=16](http://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Statistik/BundesamtinZahlen/bundesamt-in-zahlen-2016.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=16)

2 Between February and August 2022 alone, around 950 000 people moved from Ukraine to the Federal Republic. Information offered online by the Federal Statistical Office: [www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2022/10/PD22\\_428\\_12411.html](http://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2022/10/PD22_428_12411.html)

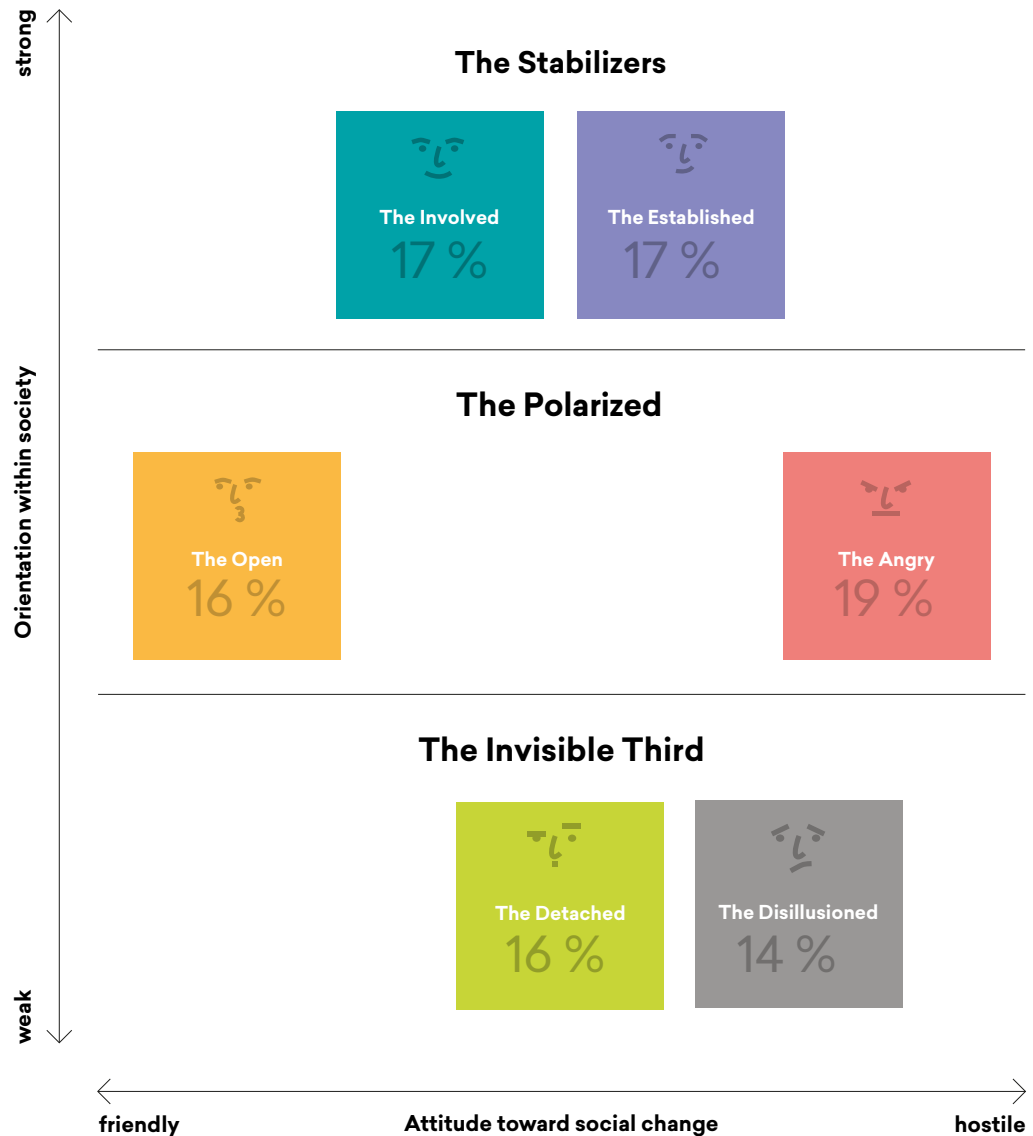
3 For 2016 alone, the Federal Interior Ministry counted over 3500 attacks against refugees: [www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/fluechtlinge-mehr-als-3500-anriffe-auf-fluechtlinge-im-jahr-2016-in-deutschland-a-1136334.html](http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/fluechtlinge-mehr-als-3500-anriffe-auf-fluechtlinge-im-jahr-2016-in-deutschland-a-1136334.html)

4 For more detail, please refer to our 2019 main study "Fault Lines: Germany's Invisible Divides": [www.dieandereteilung.de/media/o5konmo3/more-in-common\\_fault-lines\\_executive-summary.pdf](http://www.dieandereteilung.de/media/o5konmo3/more-in-common_fault-lines_executive-summary.pdf)

5 As above, please refer to our 2019 study "Fault Lines: Germany's Invisible Divides".

Diagram 1

## The three-fold division of German society



### WHAT WE FOUND

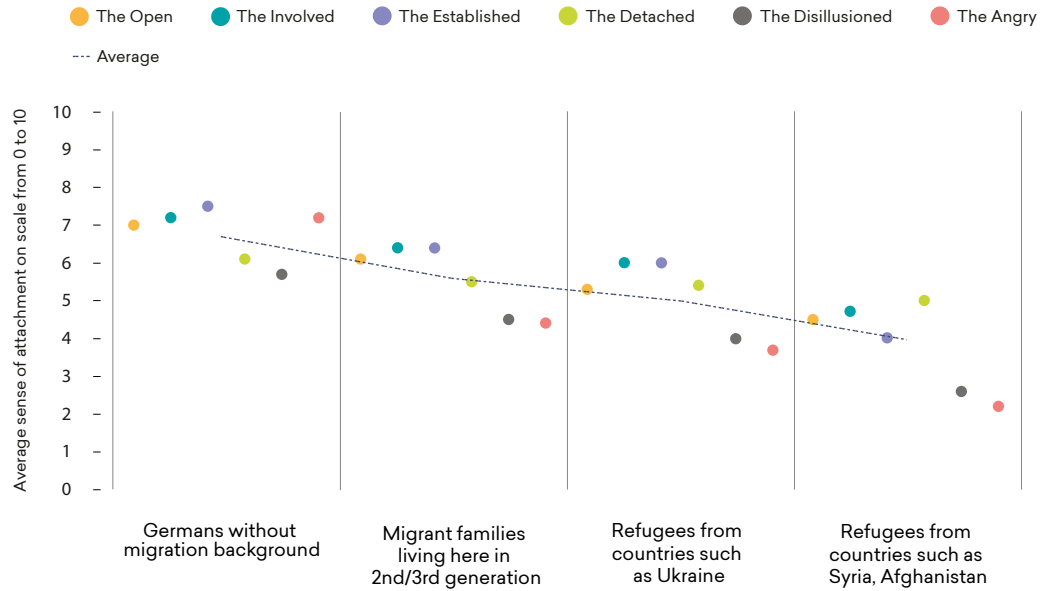
We know from earlier research that attitudes on refugee intake are complex and ambivalent: A widely shared (nominal) willingness to open categories of belonging in Germany beyond essentialist criteria, to acknowledge fleeing from war, or to reward efforts at integration, go hand in hand with a widespread affective distance toward refugees, a recurrent doubt as to their actual motives, and a majority's willingness to blame integration failures on refugees and migrants themselves.<sup>6</sup> The new insights in this 2022 brief need to be understood in that existing, multi-dimensional context.

<sup>6</sup> For more information, please refer to our 2021 research report „Zusammenhalt in der Einwanderungsgesellschaft: Wie die sechs gesellschaftlichen Typen über Migration denken“: [https://www.moreincommon.de/media/hsqba1wr/zusammenhalt\\_in\\_der\\_einwanderungsgesellschaft\\_forschungsbericht.pdf](https://www.moreincommon.de/media/hsqba1wr/zusammenhalt_in_der_einwanderungsgesellschaft_forschungsbericht.pdf)

- Germans have experienced the Ukraine crisis differently from preceding refugee situations. The intake from the European East has been relatively little contested, with an overall support of 71 percent in May 2022 (see diagram 3). For comparison: in June 2021, we still found 54 percent of Germans tending to oppose “admitting further refugees into Germany”. A reason for this disparity can be found in many people feeling affectively closer to Ukrainians than to refugees from other (non-European) areas: In July 2022, we measured a substantially higher level of subjective “attachment” towards the former (average 5.0 on a 0-10 scale) than towards refugees from Syria or Afghanistan (4.0).

Diagram 2

**Sense of attachment towards migration-related groups (July 2022)**

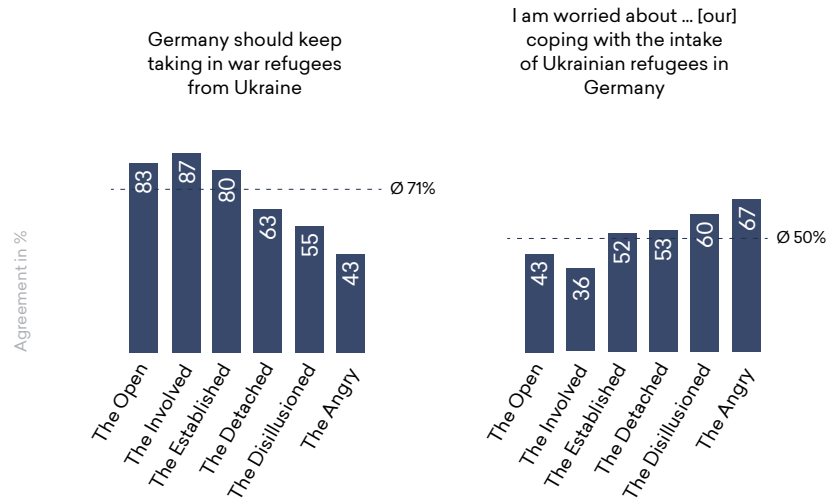


To what extent do you feel attached or not attached to the following groups?  
 Source: More in Common (2022)

- Nonetheless, coping with the current refugee intake was considered a reason for concern by 50 percent of respondents in May 2022 – with a considerable discrepancy between population segments that are characteristically more confident in their societal outlook (e.g. the Involved segment), and those who already felt more precarious and vulnerable before current crisis events (e.g. the Disillusioned segment). This shows that the intake from Ukraine is not automatically safe from toxic dynamics if a further tightening of inflation and shortages sets in.

Diagram 3

**Attitudes on refugee intake from Ukraine (May 2022)**



In your opinion, should Germany, given events in Ukraine,...? / To what extent are you personally currently worried or not worried about the following things?  
 Source: More in Common (2022)

- The principle of equal treatment of refugees was a recurrent theme in our focus groups – in two aspects that both seemed to discredit intake practice from different angles. Intake supporters tended to focus on unequal treatment between Ukrainian refugees on the one hand, and Syrians or Afghans on the other hand, whom they saw as receiving second-class treatment. Meanwhile, throughout our research, more intake-skeptic respondents have tended to focus on unequal treatment between long-term residents and refugees, whom they perceive to benefit from more flexible and generous government support.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, however, the supposedly clear division between both camps is broken up by ambivalent voices who do plead the Syrians’ (and others’) case against privileged focus on Ukrainians: not necessarily, however, to promote refugee rights, but to convey a broader distrust of refugee action as unfair. This shows how easily, and effectively, negative spin can feed off notions of injustice.

**“[Ukrainians] are very concrete neighbors, and that is a very significant difference in terms of perception. Of course, there is no difference in terms of the people. They are both people who have war in their country and then must flee out of necessity and fight for their lives, quite apart from the fact that the Syrians had an even more difficult time coming here because the hurdles were much greater than for Ukrainians, who were almost invited and pulled out.”**

Quote from an engaged person

<sup>7</sup> In our 2019 research already, a full 68 percent of respondents agreed that “today, the needs of refugees are taken into account more than the needs of residents.” The precarious-feeling “Disillusioned” segment shared this assessment at 88 percent, largely echoing the nationalist-authoritarian “Angry” segment at 97 percent.

- **Many Germans diagnose state-action deficits and lacking guidelines for integration.** Recurrent examples would be authorities failing to school refugee children effectively, to convey German language skills, or policies leading to homogeneous settlements, with the effect of “parallel societies”. Likewise, many respondents deplore refugees’ insufficient labor market integration, with a clear demand on the state to both remove access obstacles (long waiting times for work permits) and actively promote market entry.
- **Germans often tend to perceive refugee intake as overly chaotic:** While Germany has eventually managed the flows since 2015, feelings of lacking state control, oversight and planning during the process are quite widespread. Even if some see a certain learning effect between Syrian/Afghan and Ukrainian intake phases, people yet again tend not to have a sufficiently clear mental picture of how many and whence refugees have come so far, and where they have gone (particularly given the relatively flexible entry rules for Ukrainians who legally have a right to three months of visa-free residence).

**“We make big speeches that we take in everyone, that we can take everyone, that nobody will be rejected...and then we do not even know where to shelter them.”**

**Quote from a person potentially to engage**

- As to civic engagement in refugee work, people in Germany have a clear understanding of state-citizen workshare that they need to see respected in order not to feel left alone in their effort. When they are willing to engage, they expect the state to provide crucial infrastructure and cover financial burdens. For instance, engaged citizens in our conversations showed no willingness to privately co-finance sheltering refugees; they draw a conceptual line between their helping with time and energy, and the state taking care of “hardware”. When looking at engagement reality since 2015/2016, however, many citizens think that, instead of being sufficiently supported themselves, they have had to save the “state’s face” by their numerous interventions. In our focus groups, (potential) volunteers additionally complained of red tape and financial costs they were facing in refugee work, for instance in terms of required training or diplomas.

**“State and politics have obviously relied heavily on there being a lot of civic engagement.”**

**Quote from an engaged person**

## WHAT THIS MEANS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION ON AVENUES OF WELCOME

Questions of integration, fairness, societal workshare, and perceived feasibility need to be considered to create avenues of welcome that can convince large shares of the population, increase acceptance for refugees, and motivate enough individuals to engage.

In terms of communicative strategies, we suggest the following:

- **Put order center stage:** Many citizens do fear a loss of control in times of large-scale arrival. Correspondingly, clear rules and oversight are among people's most important criteria for good refugee policy.<sup>8</sup> We suggest a conceptual focus on avenues of welcome that (as much as possible given the hard circumstances of refugees), allow for clear timelines, defined contingents, and unequivocal institutional workshares.
- **Focus on enabling integration:** Acceptance increases measurably if refugees are perceived as willing and allowed to contribute to national welfare: In 2019, a full 79 percent (!) of Germans supported allowing foreigners without a valid residence permit to stay in case they had a job and were well integrated – an astonishing quasi-consensus across dividing lines in a country people have recurrently been deported from after decades of living in Germany with a tolerated status. This appreciation of successful integration is an asset for strategic communication efforts to show common ground even in fickle societal debates. It is crucial, however, to convey to citizens and institutions alike that integration is truly a two-way street: pointing out what refugees need to be able to integrate, including quick work permits, effective training, and educational offers, as well as sufficiently long life-planning horizons.

**“They come here and I think they are very well received, received very humanely, and then the problems start, including language courses. It starts with the fact that they spend 12, 16, 18, 24 months in shelters. If they could work themselves, they would certainly take a flat straight away. Then you're already more involved in German life. Then it will be easier for you to integrate. If you work, you learn the language faster, and so on and so forth. The fact that in most cases they can't do that makes integration and adaptation difficult.”**

Quote from a person potentially to engage

- **Make equal treatment count – for everyone:** Although we do see more implicit sympathy for Ukrainians than for refugees of different origin, the principle of equal treatment is a strong normative motive for most citizens, and the Ukrainian precedent may help them better understand the resources all refugees need. (After all, many respondents agreed Syrians and Afghans got an unfair treatment.) This offers a communicative opportunity to remind citizens of their own normative standards.

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<sup>8</sup> In 2021, 87 percent insisted on refugee intake happening “in a controlled manner and along clear rules”: [https://www.moreincommon.de/media/hsqba1wr/zusammenhalt\\_in\\_der\\_einwanderungsgesellschaft\\_forschungsbericht.pdf](https://www.moreincommon.de/media/hsqba1wr/zusammenhalt_in_der_einwanderungsgesellschaft_forschungsbericht.pdf)



- **Accountability:** One reason for feelings of distance toward refugees is the “mass” or “anonymous” character of events, with large numbers entering and leaving the country without ways for people to keep overview. Therefore, increasing acceptance also means showing people systematically what became of refugees, how help was given, and what the outcome has been for Germany. Make people familiar with refugees’ new lives within the country.

For the specific conversation with actual and potential volunteers in welcoming efforts (whose contribution of sheltering, supporting, and training refugees has been crucial to managing intake in Germany), we furthermore suggest the following focus:

- **Fair workshare:** In the German context, the state must support and enable citizens in their voluntary work, not the other way round. To be widely appreciated by volunteers, avenues of welcome must have the state provide the means citizens then can build on: including financial means for refugee shelter, free and time-flexible volunteer training, incentives or compensation, legal and psychological support for volunteers, spaces and locations to be used during engagement. In their communication, relevant actors should position themselves as “volunteers’ attorneys”: making the case for effective workshare, requesting enhancements where necessary, pointing out existing resources. This also includes supporting volunteers’ demands for unbureaucratic, easy and affordable engagement rules.
- **Give volunteers a chance to identify, avoid anonymity:** Refugee support needs to be further individualized. In their work, citizens need to know exactly whom they are helping; communities need to know whom and how many people they are supporting, etc. Moreover, strategic communication should tell stories of support and encounter that do not focus exclusively on the refugee side, but also show volunteers in their respective roles.
- **Build on trusted local multipliers and networks to inform and motivate:** Individual citizens often feel too overwhelmed and disoriented to take their own initiative in an anonymous context of large-scale arrival. Meanwhile, they signal higher willingness when proactively addressed in a familiar (group) setting, for instance within their church or sports group. In that context, they can build on the testimony, initiative and support of their peers and trusted on-site multipliers (associations, clubs, organizations). That way the dividing line between “general” engagement / sociability (low-threshold) and specific refugee engagement (high-threshold) blurs – which can pay off.

**“If, for example, our church group came up to me and said, listen, we need you to do this or that next Saturday, could you take a day of your time for that – I would do that.”**

Quote from an engagement-skeptic person

- **Offer different lanes to engagement, reflecting different capabilities and thresholds:** Not everyone has the means or agency to commit to demanding engagement programs over a long period of time. Strategic communication needs to avoid excessively “activist” frames of engagement that do only attract tiny shares of the population. Instead, it should systematically point out low-threshold opportunities to help – or even just attend at first.
- **Show people why engagement is good for THEM.** While high-agency citizens have the capacity to act decisively solely out of empathy and normative impulse, others need additional sources of motivation. It is crucial to point out to them how civic work benefits themselves and their group, not just their

refugee counterparts. Communications should project visions of engagement that ensure integration and shared orderliness. That speaks to the needs of more conservative audiences in particular. Likewise, promoting a culture of appreciation for volunteers is key: “Thank you!” should be the main words they hear from comms.

## **CONCLUSION**

Discourse on refugee intake does not have to become toxic if actors make good use of the common ground that exists across large shares of the population. Our research has identified areas of intervention to make refugee action a winning ticket for society: a good workshare between state and citizens, an orderly and reassuring process, the principle of two-way-street integration, equal treatment and a culture of appreciation – both for refugees and their resident counterparts. Based on these insights, More in Common invites all interested political, civil society, economic and media actors to join a conversation on how best to put smart concepts into practice.



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