

A background image of a chain-link fence, with the diamond-shaped mesh pattern visible across the entire page. The fence is slightly out of focus, giving a sense of depth.

POLICY BRIEF

The Venezuelan migration crisis meets the European refugee crisis:

The challenges of Venezuelan asylum seekers in Saxony's refugee accommodations.

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Fortress Europe? European Union's responses
to Forced Migration
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Executive summary

According to Eurostat's data, in 2015, 1.255.600 refugees applied for asylum in the European Union (Eurostat, 2016). Four years later, in the aftermath of this crisis, the unprecedented Venezuelan migration crisis reached European soil, joining many Venezuelans in the quest for asylum-seeking in the EU. In absolute numbers, by 2019, while Syrians filed 80.000 asylum applications and Afghans 61.000, 46.000 applications were filed by Venezuelans. The latter represented a new trend and positioned Venezuela as the Latin-American country with the highest asylum and protection applications in the EU (European Asylum Support Office, 2020). According to the EASO Asylum Report 2020, most of these applications for humanitarian protection and asylum were filed in Spain; however, a considerable number of Venezuelans have decided to apply in Germany. Unlike other refugees, Venezuelans flee from a severe political, social, economic, and humanitarian crisis, not an armed conflict. However, once they apply for asylum, they face the same fate as other refugees; they endure and spend their asylum application process living in refugee accommodations. In the Venezuelans' case, Saxony's federal state reunites all these applications, being these refugees located in Initial reception centers (Erstaufnahmeeinrichtung) in the cities of Chemnitz, Dresden, and Leipzig.

At the same time, refugee accommodations' structure, nature, and existence are quite a contested topic in the refugee crisis' context within the EU. For instance, the scholar René Kreichauf introduces the concept of *campization*, arguing that in European cities, "refugee accommodations have increasingly been transformed into large camp-like structures with lowered living standards and a closed character" (Kreichauf, 2018, p.1). By linking this argument with the challenges that Venezuelan refugees face inside Saxony's accommodations, this policy brief will be based on the research done by the association Einheit für Venezuela e.V. who, by interviewing Venezuelan refugees inside these initial reception centers, identified challenges that affect their living conditions jeopardizing these challenges their asylum and integration process. These challenges range from severe language barriers, issues related to food services and psychological assistance, and the accommodations' location and remoteness. Therefore, this policy brief will propose strategic alliances between Saxony's public administration, migrant and refugee organizations, advocacy groups, and language institutions. Finally, it will provide further recommendations for the latter's implementation to improve this situation.



Rationale for action on the problem

According to the Report on the Situation of Venezuelan Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Germany published in November 2020 by the association Einheit für Venezuela e.V, Saxony is the federal state in Germany that processes Venezuelan asylum applications (Trompetero & Liebezeit, 2020). Moreover, in 2019, 6.645 refugees applied for asylum in Saxony, representing Venezuelans 11.4% of this population, reaching the top of the list, followed by Georgians, Syrians, and Pakistanis (Landesdirektion Sachsen, 2019). Since Saxony reunites this population of Venezuelan asylum seekers, once they apply for asylum they are transferred to the following accommodation centers: (i) Max-Liebermann Straße in Leipzig, (ii) Westringstraße in Dölzig, (iii) Adalbert-Stifter-Weg in Chemnitz, (iv) Alte Hohe Straße in Schneeberg and (v) Hamburger Straße and Bremer Straße in Dresden. Furthermore, the Landesdirektion Sachsen is the institution in charge of the location in these facilities.

Regarding the challenges that Venezuelan refugees face in these accommodations, Einheit für Venezuela conducted 32 semi-structured and anonymous interviews inside the initial reception centers. The result of these interviews highlights that these refugee accommodations are not well capacitated to meet the needs of Venezuelan refugees and asylum seekers.

Firstly, there is a critical language barrier between the staff and Venezuelan refugees. In addition to English and German, some of the staff members can communicate in Arabic; however, this is not the case with Spanish. Despite being some Venezuelans able to communicate in English, this is not the majority's case, resulting in communicational problems and misunderstandings between staff, refugees, and the rest of the facility's inhabitants. This language barrier also affects mediation when it comes to conflict resolution or simply clarifying problematic situations. Thus, the interviews highlighted that Venezuelan refugees feel neglected and disadvantaged when a mediator is needed to solve coexistence issues inside the accommodation.

Moreover, the language barrier also affects access to vital information and proper understanding of the asylum application process, especially when signing important documents. The Report highlights Venezuelan refugees' claim to sign important documents after they are translated to Spanish, so they are fully aware and in accordance with what they are signing. In the interviews, several refugees alleged that in many cases, the latter is not done to save time and effort, resulting in essential documents where vital information such as their declarations for their asylum application are not correctly translated. Many of them are hastily signed before realizing that the exposed information is not entirely accurate, jeopardizing this their asylum application process. Other issues, such as the absence of translators when it comes to health assistance, feeds the language barrier issue.

Representing Venezuelan refugees and asylum seekers an important number in Saxony, and also being Spanish one of the official languages of the European Union, it is unacceptable that the center is not assisted by enough translators that help to meet these refugees' communicational needs showing this a policy failure within the center's administration.

Secondly, food services issues were also raised in the interviews regarding special dietary requirements for babies, individuals who recently experienced surgery, and diabetics. Moreover, and because in initial reception centers, refugees are not allowed to cook for their own, the interviews highlighted that the ingredients used for the meals are designed for more African and Arabic taste, resulting in digestive problems for Venezuelan refugees.

According to reports of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) regarding the conditions in initial reception centers, "the management of the catering facilities tries to ensure that specific food is provided with regard to religious sentiments"(Informationsverbund Asyl und Migration, 2020). The latter excludes other specifications such as cultural background and special dietary requirements. In the interviews, the issue raised by Venezuelan refugees highlights the need for centers' catering management to consider other elements such as the latter mentioned when it comes to the menu's offer.

Thirdly, the lack of psychological assistance, especially in Spanish, was also an important topic raised in the interviews. Due to the extended stay in the accommodations, which for single individuals may last up to 18 months, the legal and emotional void as a consequence provokes heavy depression, anxiety, and sadness, leading in some cases to suicide attempts. According to Einheit für Venezuela, the word sadness was frequently mentioned in the interviews (Trompetero & Liebezeit, 2020).

According to the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) report on the Anker Centers in Germany, the need for adequate access to mental health is highlighted, given that the conditions mentioned above are generally prevalent in the centers. Nonetheless, these services' expenses and doctors' travel costs to the centers are not covered (Mouzourakis et al., 2019). Since refugees are experiencing a complex and challenging asylum process and have already experienced emotional and psychological trauma, efforts must be made to provide psychological assistance in a language where the affected person feels as comfortable as possible.

Lastly, the accommodations' location and remoteness also present an issue, making refugees feel socially isolated, jeopardizing their integration sentiments and process. The latter also creates frustration since many have expressed their desire to integrate, work and not be a burden to the German state (Trompetero & Liebezeit, 2020).

According to the scholar René Kreichauf, there is a tendency to locate refugee accommodations in remote areas outside cities. Therefore, these accommodations are attributed to the nature of separating populations, territorializing refugees in extraterritorial locations marking their position in society. Moreover, he argues that these facilities “have been institutionally established because they follow the political objectives to protect the EU’s and national orders and to deter migrants. [The latter] is in line with the EU’s general attempts to reduce the number of refugees and to extraterritorialize migrants inside and outside of the EU” (Kreichauf, 2018, p.18). Thus, this argument proves that the case of the accommodations in the state of Saxony is not isolated or rare; however, it is just one more example of a normalized situation that does not help the well-being nor the proper integration of refugees.

Proposed Policy options

To solve these issues, this policy brief proposes strategic alliances between Saxony’s public administration, organizations, and advocacy groups that are willing to assist the center’s administration, especially when dealing with less infrastructural problems such as psychological assistance and translations.

Understandably, the center’s administration is quite busy with the center’s management from the infrastructural point of view. Therefore, this policy brief proposes to lighten this burden by allowing migrant organizations such as Einheit für Venezuela e.V., Sächsischer Flüchtlingsrat e.V., as for refugee advocacy groups based in volunteering, to assist in this matter. When it comes to the language issue and translations to Spanish, in the case of the accommodations in Saxony, this coordination should not present a significant challenge since all Venezuelan refugees are accommodated in the same state of Saxony; hence, they are all concentrated in the same place. Moreover, collaborations with either organizations based in Spanish-speaking countries or institutes and language schools in Germany that capacitate translators from German to Spanish are viable options.

Regarding psychological assistance, alliances with Caritas, the Red Cross, and other organizations that support refugees should be encouraged. Finally, it is vital to consider different nationalities’ needs within the center when providing these services inside the facilities to avoid competition and to other refugees feel neglected.

Policy recommendations

To implement the options mentioned above, this policy brief recommends the Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF) in alliance with Saxony’s state government to design projects that include the organizations mentioned above and allow these organizations to build bridges and expand the network, including other organizations willing to cooperate in this matter.

Moreover, this policy brief recommends extending this alliance and cooperation network to language institutions in Germany, such as the Instituto Cervantes and university language centers, to develop projects that help ease the language barriers concerning the Spanish language. For instance, providing capacitation and more translation services, either on-site and/or online. The latter could also offer the opportunity to capacitate the staff regarding language skills, especially if Saxony's state continues to reunite the location of Venezuelan refugees and, maybe in the future, other Spanish-speaking refugees and asylum seekers.

Regarding the psychological assistance, digitalization and online alternatives brought by the COVID-19 pandemic represent an essential tool to reduce costs in providing this service. Therefore, psychological consultation can be offered online, meaning that the expert could also be anywhere in the world during consultation or therapy sessions. In this sense, this policy brief recommends extending bridges of cooperation with the Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela to organize and coordinate efforts to assist Venezuelan asylum seekers in Saxony since the Coordination Platform is already familiarized with the Venezuelan migration crisis' context. Moreover, Einheit für Venezuela e.V. and other Venezuelan migrants' associations can reach out to mental health advocacy organizations from Latin America and Spain to participate in these efforts.

Finally, regarding the general situation on the refugee's accommodation and the identified issues on their remote location, this policy briefs recommends the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) to considerate organizations such as Einheit für Venezuela e.V and Sächsischer Flüchtlingsrat e.V., as part of their alliance, especially in their advocacy efforts on "Changing the Agenda" and their search to influence government policy in Europe concerning refugees. Hopefully, these organizations' presence helps raise the awareness of this specific matter to a European Union level to create effective change and provide more funding to make these efforts happen.

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