

German politics

Most refugees to be jobless for years, German minister warns

Prediction of long-term unemployment as hopes fade of boost to workforce skills



People at a jobs fair for refugees in central Berlin © Getty

Guy Chazan in Hamburg JUNE 22 2017



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Up to three quarters of Germany's refugees will still be unemployed in five years' time, according to a government minister, in a stark admission of the challenges the country faces in integrating its huge migrant population.

Aydan Özoğuz, commissioner for immigration, refugees and integration, told the Financial Times that only a quarter to a third of the newcomers would enter the labour market over the next five years, and "for many others we will need up to 10".

The admission could prove awkward for Angela Merkel as she seeks a [fourth term](#) as chancellor in Bundestag elections this September.

Ms Merkel saw her poll ratings plummet in 2015 when she responded to Europe's gathering refugee crisis by throwing open Germany's borders. The migrant issue no longer dominates the country's nightly news bulletins, but pollsters say the question of how it will absorb the 1.3m migrants who have arrived here since the start of 2015 is still one of voters' key concerns.

That explains the continuing popularity of the [Alternative for Germany](#), an anti-immigrant party that is now represented in 12 of Germany's 16 regional parliaments. The AfD's poll ratings have fallen in recent months but the party is still expected to pick up seats in the Bundestag for the first time in this year's election.

Initially, the influx of so many working-age, highly-motivated immigrants spurred optimism that they would mitigate Germany's acute skills shortage and solve the demographic crisis posed by its dangerously low birth rate. Dieter Zetsche, chief executive of carmaker [Daimler](#), said the refugees could lay the foundation for the "next German economic miracle".

484,000

Number of refugees looking for work, up from 322,000 last July

But those hopes have faded as a [new realism](#) about the migrants' lack of qualifications and language skills sinks in. "There has been a shift in perceptions," Ms Özoğuz told the FT. Many of the first Syrian refugees to arrive in Germany were doctors and engineers, but they were succeeded by "many, many more who lacked skills".

A recent report by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) found that only 45 per cent of Syrian refugees in Germany have a school-leaving certificate and 23 per cent a college degree.

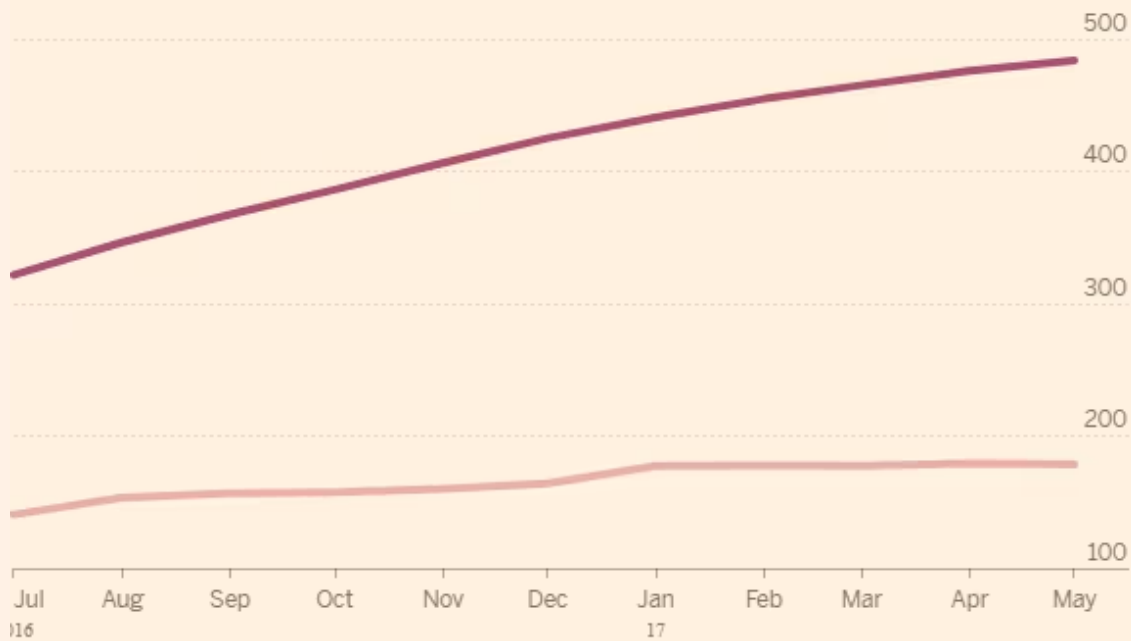
Statistics from the Federal Labour Agency show the employment rate among refugees stands at just 17 per cent. It said 484,000 of the refugees are looking for work, up from 322,000 last July — an increase of 50 per cent.

Of those, 178,500 are officially unemployed, meaning they not only have no work but are not enrolled in any training programmes or language courses — up 27 per cent on last July.

German refugees

('000s)

— Looking for work...
— ..of these, officially unemployed*



*not enrolled on German language courses or training programmes

Source: Federal Employment Agency

FT

Researchers are noting a slight improvement in the refugees' employment prospects. A study by the Ifo Institute found 22 per cent of companies had hired a refugee in the past year compared with just 7 per cent at the end of 2015. However, they were mainly being employed as interns, support staff and apprentices, with only 8 per cent hired as skilled workers.

Ms Özoğuz said the authorities' main priority was not to find employment for the refugees as soon as possible but to ensure they learnt German and had access to training to acquire the skills needed for an advanced industrial economy.

"In the past, we put people very quickly into jobs where they didn't need to speak, and 40 years later people asked them — how come you still can't speak German?" she said. "We don't want to repeat that mistake."

She said authorities had speeded up asylum procedures, so migrants did not have to wait "years or even decades" for a decision on their status, and were getting better at recognising foreign professional qualifications so it was easier for refugees to seek employment in Germany.

Bureaucracy continues to be a problem for firms trying to hire refugees. In the Ifo survey, 45 per cent of companies said the workers' residence status was the biggest hurdle while 36 per cent named the long duration of asylum procedures.

Federal Employment Agency statistics show that only 6,500 refugees are enrolled in work training programmes. Around 12,000 applied but were not awarded a place.

Ms Özoğuz insisted that the new immigrants shouldn't be seen primarily as an economic resource.

“We don't take in refugees according to their skills set,” she said. “The only criteria should be to help people fleeing war and political persecution.”

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