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The Fortress European City: The socio-spatial Exclusion of Asylum Seekers in Copenhagen, Madrid, and Berlin

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The Fortress European City: The socio-spatial Exclusion of Asylum Seekers in Copenhagen, Madrid, and Berlin

By René Kreichauf

1) INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND:

The number of asylum seekers¹ in the European Union (EU) has been grown significantly in recent years. While there were 200.000 asylum applicants in 2006, the number rose in the European Union to more than 330.000 in 2012. In the first two quarters of 2013 (January to July), almost 200.000 people applied for asylum in the countries of the EU, an increase of around 50 per cent compared to the first two quarters of 2012 (UNHCR 2013a). Due to persecution, war, ethnic, tribal and religious violence, as well as on-going conflicts and trying situations in African and Arabian countries, more asylum seekers are expected to flee to the EU in the future.

Asylum is a fundamental right; granting it is an international obligation first recognised in the 1951 Geneva Convention on the protection of refugees. In the EU, states need to have a joint approach to guarantee high standards of protection for refugees (European Commission 2013). Asylum seekers are distributed unevenly throughout the EU. In individual countries, asylum seekers are usually distributed to the states/regions of the country, and then to the municipalities and cities due to an allocation key or code (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees 2013). This means that, in the end, it is the city and the local communities that are in charge and responsible for the integration, care and housing of asylum seekers.

As a result of the rising number of asylum seekers, cities and municipalities in several EU countries have been confronted with many challenges when attempting to integrate and provide housing to asylum applicants. Cities are not only challenged by the assignment to provide the infrastructure for displaced persons, but also with conflicts arising from cities and neighbourhoods that feel they are overcharged with tolerating and welcoming asylum seekers. One example of this is the current conflict regarding a new asylum centre opening in Berlin-Hellersdorf.² There are also a rising number of protests and so-called "Refugee Protest Camps"³ in the public spaces of European cities that are used as a site for demonstrations and to assist in negotiating the political and social interests of asylum seekers. The issue of asylum immigration can thus be

¹ An asylum seeker is someone who has asked the government for protection under international law and has not yet had a decision on his or her case. A refugee is someone who has proven that they need protection under international law and the government has granted them refugee status (UNHCR 2013b).

² In summer 2013, the protest of local residents against the opening of a new accommodation centre in Berlin-Hellersdorf (Germany) attracted considerable interested in media all over Europe. Consequently, the concerns of the residents resulted in social unrest, and daily demonstration against both the centre and asylum seekers, including attacks on building and the asylum seekers. Finally, the movement was overtaken by the NPD, Germany's extremist right wing party (Camperl 2013).

³ Refugee Protest Camps are tent settlements in the public space of a city used to demonstrate the situation and political demands of asylum seekers and refugees. Political activists, parties, and NGO's often support them.

considered in the context of the private space and “homes” of asylum seekers as well as in the context of protests and camps that exist in the public, urban and “transferring” space of political demands. The issue of housing for asylum seekers is strongly connected to questions of solidarity and integration policy and, perhaps most importantly, depends upon the ability of a city and communities to receive and include asylum immigrants. Understanding and analysing the EU integration process is therefore dependent on comparing and contrasting spatial issues and dimensions, protests on behalf of asylum seekers, national and local regulations, and the varied manifestations of these factors in the context of different cities.

2. RESEARCH QUESTION(S), FIELDS OF INTEREST, AND CASES

The presentation aims to illustrate the spatial dimensions of exclusionary mechanisms applied to immigrants asking for asylum in European cities. It focuses on the housing of asylum seekers, its policies, effects, causes, conflicts and resistance, with the assumption that housing asylum seekers is relevant for the integration process of this group. The presentation thus explores these **main questions**: 1) To what extent does the housing of asylum seekers affect the inclusion process into the urban society, and 2) how do asylum seekers act against exclusionary mechanisms and how do they negotiate their political interests? In this context, the presentation focuses on four **fields of interests**: the *policy and responsibilities* regarding housing asylum seekers on the EU, national and local level, the illustration of the *location and characteristics of housing*, the *conflicts* that arise from housing asylum seekers in communities, and forms of *resistance* by asylum seekers and political activists against the housing policy.

The discourse uses three different analytical tools to illustrate the spatial dimension of socially excluding asylum seekers: policy research, theory, and empirical research. **Policy research** focuses on asylum policy on the European, national, and local level. It also investigates the legal situation of asylum seekers on the European and national scale to discuss regulations on the development of housing for asylum seekers on the local level.

The **theoretical embedding** centres on Michel Foucault’s theory of discipline and punishment and his ideas on utopias and heterotopias (Foucault 1977, Foucault 1984). It also includes theories on (forced) segregation (for example Avakin 1997; Nightingale 2012; Quillian 2012; Sager 2011), and social exclusion in European cities (for example Guldentops 2001, Sako 2001; Peretz 2001; Schuster 2004; Spicer 2006; Taylor 2004). These two angles are combined with current research on housing asylum applicants (for example Dwyer 2010; Hynes 2011; Kisson 2010; O’Mahony 2010; Rosenberger 2011; Szczepanikova 2012). The theoretical framework is also based on research that addresses the concept of the right to the city (for example Harvey 2012; Lefebvre 1996; Mitchell 2003; Purcell 2002), and with findings on resistance, protest and urban space (for example Smith, 1996; Gelées 2010; McCann 1999; Milstein 2000).

The major part of the presentation is dedicated to the **empirical work**. Using three case studies in North, Middle and South Europe, the thesis aims to give a broad understanding of the local practices, policies, and conditions of housing for asylum seekers in the EU. The empirical work follows the fundamental questions of who is in charge of housing asylum seekers, and what consequences develop from the political and administrative decisions. The research is of a comparative nature, and presents housing policies in Copenhagen (Denmark), Berlin (Germany), Madrid (Spain).

3. CONCLUSION

Even though, there are EU regulations on the rights and obligations of asylum seekers, housing is an issue that is approached on the local level. The findings of the analysis of the case studies illustrate different approaches regarding housing and including asylum applicants in the urban society, which will be presented more detailed. However, it is obvious that asylum centres are the dominant form of accommodating asylum applicants in all three cases.

Overall, there are following results: The political and societal dealings with asylum seekers and, more specifically, the location for housing of asylum seekers in either deprived neighbourhoods on the outskirts (Madrid, Berlin) or outside of European cities (especially Copenhagen, but also Berlin and Madrid), and the material conditions of the housing affect the inclusion process and the image of asylum seekers and their housing. Therefore, neighbourhood conflicts arise between migrants and neighbourhood residents, and migrants resist (often by means of protests in the urban space) against their living conditions. However, while ruffled feelings and protests have been smoothed in Copenhagen (mostly due to political repression and small improvements regarding the asylum legislation), there is an increase of political protest and resistance by political groups and asylum seekers considering the housing situation in Berlin and Madrid, which emerged due to neighbourhood conflicts, the occupation of public spaces, and solidarity movements.

The European City is often described as a place of openness, integration, and emancipation (Simmel 1950; Siebel 2004). However, this research work shows how asylum seekers are systematically prevented to benefit from these features. It clarifies the disadvantageous housing situation, discrimination practices and the issue of a possible failed integration, and it finally illustrates that the European City has built a new, invisible wall that excludes “non-citizens” from the actual urban life. In regards to locally “unwanted” migration groups, the European City developed to some kind of a new Fortress City.

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5. INFORMATION ON THE AUTHOR

René Kreichauf is an urban planner and urban sociologist from Berlin, Germany. As a research assistant he has worked among others for the Department for Urban Sociology (Technical University Berlin), Department for Sociology (Technical University Vienna), the Chicago Urban Art Society (Chicago), the Heinrich Böll Foundation European Union (Brussels), and the Berlin House of Representatives. His research work and publications concentrate on social inequality, migration research, and urban decline in American cities, as well as European urban development. In 2012, he was honoured with an award for young researchers by the Balg Mächler Foundation for his Bachelor Thesis on ethnic segregation in German small towns.

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