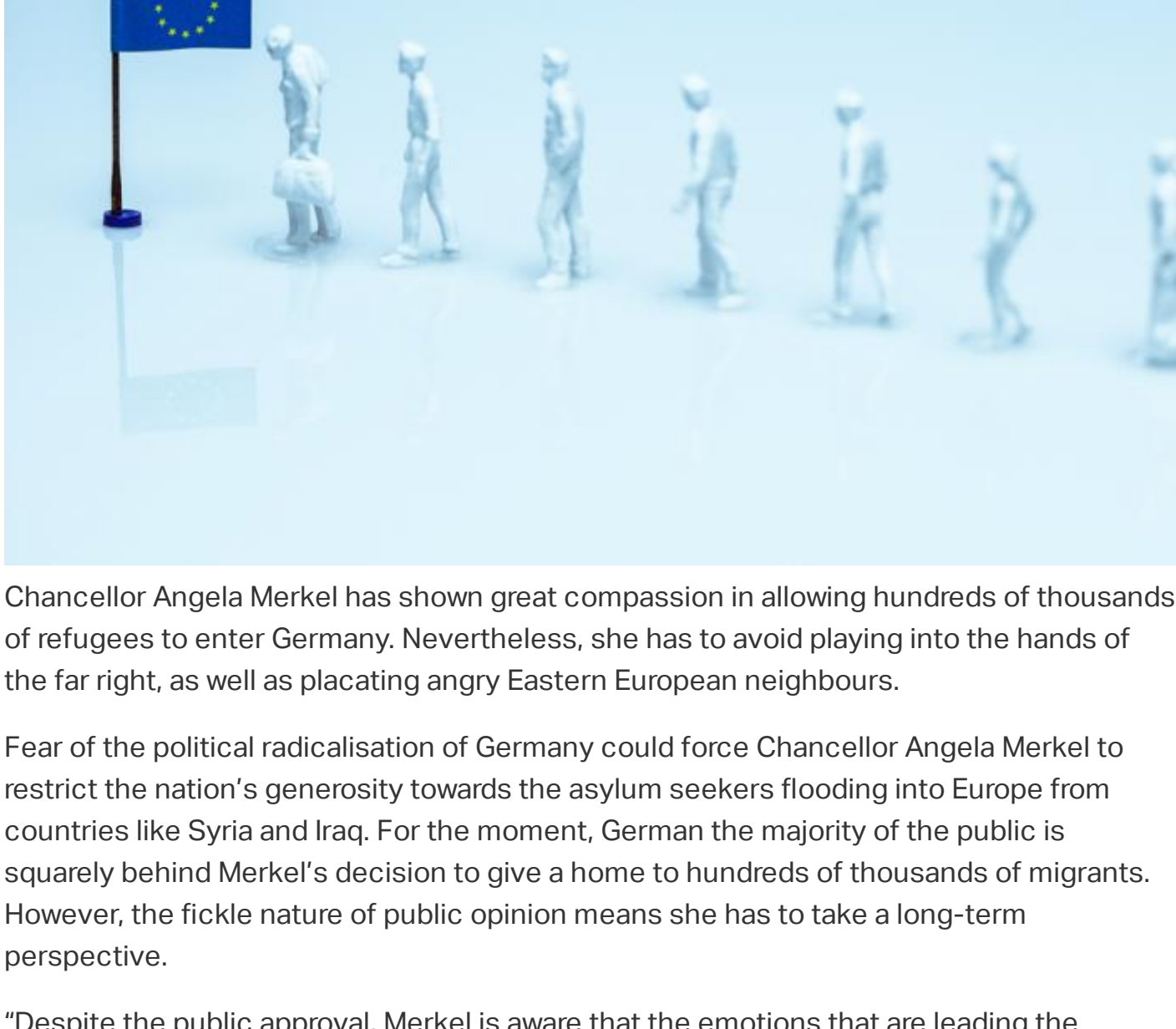




Merkel Faces Tough Political Decisions Over Refugees

SEPTEMBER 24, 2015 • GLOBAL CHALLENGES • BY **DAVID SMITH**

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Chancellor Angela Merkel has shown great compassion in allowing hundreds of thousands of refugees to enter Germany. Nevertheless, she has to avoid playing into the hands of the far right, as well as placating angry Eastern European neighbours.

Fear of the political radicalisation of Germany could force Chancellor Angela Merkel to restrict the nation's generosity towards the asylum seekers flooding into Europe from countries like Syria and Iraq. For the moment, German the majority of the public is squarely behind Merkel's decision to give a home to hundreds of thousands of migrants. However, the fickle nature of public opinion means she has to take a long-term perspective.

"Despite the public approval, Merkel is aware that the emotions that are leading the political debate are highly volatile," said Professor Christian Dustmann, Director of CReAM (the Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration. "We had a wave of sympathy when the dead body of a Kurdish boy washed up on a Turkish beach. However, the basis for the reaction was not on strong economic indicators, but on emotions that could change around very quickly. Merkel understands that as well."

A prolonged flow of migrants into Germany of the magnitude we have seen this year could see a rise in far-right politics in Germany, Professor Dustmann says. In the first seven months of 2015, Germany received well over 200,000 applications for asylum, leading Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere to predict that 800,000 people would arrive in the country as refugees, or to pursue asylum, by the end of the year. "If all other countries are not willing to take their fair share, including the UK, it could lead to political radicalisation in Germany and we are now seeing attempts from the German Government to send signals that this flow has to be limited somehow," said Professor Dustmann.

Angela Merkel was behind this week's decision to force through a deal to impose refugee quotas on EU countries, which will see 120,000 refugees distributed around Europe. That is a small fraction of the numbers are likely arrive in the coming years and Germany is certain to take far more of them than would be required under the agreement. A few weeks ago the Vice Chancellor, Sigmar Gabriel, announced that Germany could handle a staggering half a million asylum-seekers per year for the foreseeable future. But Professor Dustmann questions the validity of Gabriel's claim. "That was a very rash statement made in the heat of the moment. It's not in any way an official commitment from the Government," he said.

Although Germany will continue to be generous, the Government will also have to keep one eye on political opponents who could use the crisis to manipulate public opinion. To date, there has been a muted right-wing opposition. There have been a few neo-Nazi demonstrations and some migrant shelters have been vandalised. The anti-immigration movement is not as strong in Germany as in several other European nations. A notable example is the UK, where the anti-EU, anti-immigration UK Independence Party (UKIP) received 3.8 million votes in the 2015 general election.

The popularity of UKIP partly, though not entirely, explains the UK's limp response to the refugee crisis. The UK has committed to accepting 20,000 Syrian refugees over the next five years. More arrived in Germany in one weekend in August. The UK has also refused to take part in the EU quota scheme. "The ruling Conservative Party is petrified of UKIP," said Aston University politics professor Simon Green. "The political genius of UKIP's leader Nigel Farage has been to link immigration and the EU together. In Germany, the equivalent of UKIP -the Alternative for Germany (AfD) - has suffered from fractious infighting and unceremoniously booted out its leader. It has scored a few victories in regional elections and earned 4.7% in the last federal election, but it's not the threat to Merkel that UKIP is to David Cameron."

Professor Green, however, also counsels that a German decision to continue accepting extremely high numbers of refugees could have "unpredictable" political consequences. Last week, politicians from the sister party to Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) called the chancellor's open-door policy an "unprecedented political mistake". The Christian Social Union, in Bavaria, suggested Germany would be overwhelmed, that its culture would be at risk, and that Islamic State fighters might enter along with the refugees. For the moment, the negative comments are at odds with the positive public response in Germany, where volunteers and officials have welcomed thousands of migrants in recent weeks at Munich and Frankfurt train stations. Polls suggest nearly 60% of the nation back Merkel's warm welcome.

The origins of the German public's positive response are in the nation's past, says Professor Dustmann. "The strong sympathy arises from German history which has been very dark in parts. Millions of older Germans recall that they were once refugees. Poland and the Soviet Union saw around 15 million Germans displaced when they drew a new map of Europe in 1945-6. They see themselves, or their parents, or grandparents, in the hardships faced by the Syrian refugees. That's entirely different to European countries that have not been exposed to that experience, such as the UK, which takes full advantage of its island status."

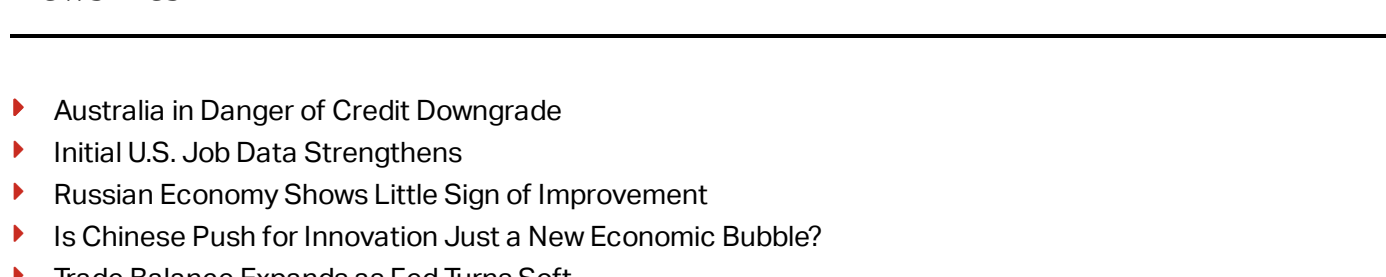
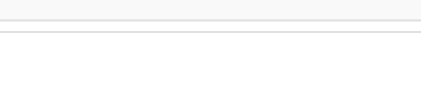
Whereas the UK has not traditionally taken in many refugees - with the exception of 1999 and 2000 under Prime Minister Tony Blair - Germany has a long tradition of welcoming them. Germany took more than one million refugees from the Balkans after the Yugoslav wars from 1991 to 2001. Further back in time, Germany took in many Tamils after the civil wars in Sri Lanka.

The German openness, however, puts Europe's most powerful nation at odds with many of its neighbours in Eastern Europe. The EU's most extreme anti-immigration hardliner, Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, has warned Merkel against "moral imperialism". Meanwhile, the outvoted and overruled Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians and Romanians were angry about the outcome of the quota vote this week.

Although Poland broke with its Eastern European allies to vote in favour of the quota, the acceptance is likely to be temporary. The nationalist right will likely win next month's national election and the probable new Prime Minister, Beata Szydł□o, plans to reverse it.

Merkel's political task remains formidable. She has to find a way of continuing with her compassionate policies towards refugees whilst placating the anger of her neighbours in Eastern Europe and preventing a potential rise of radicalisation in Germany. "I wouldn't want to speculate on how many immigrants Germany will take in the next few years, but the attitude of generosity is likely to continue," said Professor Dustmann. "But Merkel has to be aware that the longer-term political fall-out has to be considered. She is clever enough to see that, so I think we will see a limitation of the policies we have seen thus far."

See also: [Refugee Crisis Highlights ASEAN's Small State Security Issues](#)



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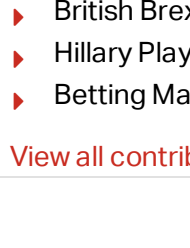
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An English journalist who, when he's not exploring the social consequences of political actions, likes to write about cricket for some light relief.

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