

[Germany bets on second time lucky with migrant workers](#) [Joseph Nasr](#) 9  
MIN READ

GESCHER, Germany (Reuters) - As Germany struggles to absorb more than a million migrants from the Middle East and Africa, the government is hoping to avoid the mistakes it made half a century ago when it brought in a generation of guest workers from Turkey.

See additional photos below



Merhawi Tesfay, an immigrant from Eritrea poses during a Reuters interview at German plant engineering firm Kremer Machine Systems where he found a job as electrician and plant manufacturer in Gescher near Muenster, Germany, August 4, 2017. Picture taken August 4, 2017. REUTERS/Wolfgang Rattay

In the 1960s, hundreds of thousands of Turkish men were invited in to fill labor shortages. But Germany made no attempt to help them learn the language or upgrade their skills. The result is that three million Turks in Germany are still struggling today. They are the least integrated minority, with an unemployment rate of about 16 percent, almost three times the national average.

Now, two years after it threw open its doors to the latest migrants, Germany has devised an integration strategy based on language and job training intended to get the newcomers into work and off welfare. Among the changes are 600 hours of mandatory language lessons and fast-tracked work permits. These measures are

starting to show signs of success: a growing number of migrants are joining a labor market where a record 1.1 million jobs are unfilled.

“Things are very different here,” said Merhawi Tesfay, a 32-year-old Eritrean who was hired by Kremer Machine Systems, an engineering company in the town of Gescher in western Germany. “In Eritrea you find work through word of mouth. Here you have the Job Centre and online job sites. Everything comes with too much bureaucracy and my German wasn’t good enough.”

Tesfay was hired initially as a trainee and then full-time, through ELNet, a government-funded project run by charities who assign mentors to refugees. He had been looking for work for almost three years. Waves of migrants, many forced to flee Syria’s civil war, began arriving in large numbers two years ago, one of the biggest migration movements Europe had seen since World War Two.

The challenge now for Germany, which took in the largest number of the incomers in western Europe, is to integrate them into society over the long term. With its strong economy, Germany is better placed than many European countries, especially in southern Europe, to accept migrants. German unemployment is at its lowest since 1990 and seven straight years of growth mean the government can afford to put aside more than 10 billion euros a year for refugees. **“The lesson that Germany learnt is that integration is something you work on,” said Herbert Bruecker of Humboldt University of Berlin. “It doesn’t happen on its own”.**

## **GIVE AND TAKE**

When the first Turkish guest workers arrived in the 1960s, German politicians, still preoccupied with rebuilding the economy after World War Two, regarded them as a temporary measure. The perception was that Turks were guests who would go back home. The Turks of course did not go home. And their wives and children began following them, just as the oil crisis of the early 1970s pushed Germany into a recession that cost many guest workers their jobs.

***With low skills and little grasp of the language, many found it hard to find work again as Germany shifted away from industry towards automation and services. This time, Germany has taken a different approach.***

***One month after her decision to open Germany’s borders to refugees fleeing war and persecution, Chancellor Angela Merkel told parliament in September 2015 that Germany should learn from its mistakes with the Turkish guest workers and seek to integrate asylum seekers from day one. Since then, her government has focused on language and vocational training to help 1.2 million asylum seekers get into a manpower-hungry labor market and wean them off Germany’s generous welfare system.***

Under legislation approved in August 2016, integration courses including language learning were made mandatory for all refugees and asylum seekers from countries such as Syria, Eritrea and Afghanistan. The new rules also included a ‘Give and Take’ clause giving authorities powers to cut financial aid to asylum seekers if they don’t attend language courses.

Merhawi Tesfay, an immigrant from Eritrea poses during a Reuters interview at German plant engineering firm Kremer Machine Systems where he found a job as electrician and plant manufacturer in Gescher near Muenster, Germany, August 4, 2017. Picture taken August 4, 2017. REUTERS/Wolfgang Rattay The government speeded up work permits for asylum seekers, and scrapped a rule under which Job

Centres had to prove they couldn't find a European Union citizen for a vacancy before they could offer it to a refugee.

There are several signs that the measures are working: Some 203,000 migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, Iran, Pakistan, Nigeria and Somalia were employed in May, according to the Labour Agency, 23,000 more than in February. "The employment numbers leave much to be desired," said Thomas Liebig of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. "But clearly many of the measures that have been taken are in the right direction."

## INCENTIVES

The government is also offering financial incentives for companies that offer vocational traineeships to refugees and asylum seekers. This could amount to half a new recruit's salary for a year. More than 13,500 refugees are taking part in these schemes, which involve learning a profession at a technical college while at the same time gaining experience with a company.

While it's too early to say whether the program is a success in Germany, salary assistance schemes have boosted migrant employment rates in Scandinavia. *"Most of the refugees come from countries where they either study or work," said Christina Mersch, who heads a government-funded project at the DIHK Chambers of Commerce called 'Companies integrate refugees'. "So it's difficult to explain to them that in Germany you can do both simultaneously."*

***Germany suffers from labor shortages as its population ages. This bodes well for the largely low-skilled migrants given that sectors requiring unskilled labor such as catering and hospitality are growing fastest.***

"In the last three years, 1.6 million positions were created in low-skilled sectors, 45 percent of which were jobs for which one requires no formal qualifications," said Bruecker of Humboldt University. "We don't only need doctors and engineers".

## HERE TO STAY

*Despite its integration push, Germany appears to be repeating one mistake it made with the Gastarbeiter in the 1960s. Last year it granted fewer applicants full refugee status, suggesting it is expecting some migrants to go home. Temporary residence permits, rather than full refugee status, hamper integration, economists say, as this discourages companies from hiring people who may not remain in Germany. In the first seven months of last year, more than three-quarters of Syrian applicants were granted full refugee status and just over one-fifth were given a one-year residence permit. Over the same period this year, only one third of Syrians were granted full refugee status and six out of ten got a temporary permit.*

"The main mistake is that most refugees are being given temporary residency permits because of the false expectation that they would return," said Bruecker. "This could have fatal economic consequences. Why would firms invest in someone whose prospects to remain are uncertain?" About 90 percent of the new arrivals have said in surveys they want to stay in Germany permanently.

The stricter asylum rules were quietly introduced last year after Merkel's conservatives were punished in regional elections by Germans angry with her decision to welcome asylum seekers. Voters backed the anti-

immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD), which is expected to enter the national parliament for the first time in a general election on Sept. 24. Whether Germany's integration strategy succeeds will depend largely on how many migrants arrive in the months and years after the election, in which Merkel is expected to win a fourth term.

"I don't think Germany will fail," said Reiner Klingholz of the Berlin Institute for Population and Development, noting that 116,000 asylum applications were filed in the first seven months of this year, well down on the crisis year of 2015. "But another dramatic surge in asylum arrivals may well overwhelm the system," he said. "The first refugee crisis produced the AfD. A second one could bring down a government."

Additional reporting by Daniel Felleiter; Editing by Giles Elgood *Our Standards*: [The Thomson Reuters Trust Principles. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-election-migrants-insight/germany-bets-on-second-time-lucky-with-migrant-workers-idUSKCN1AY1MZ](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-election-migrants-insight/germany-bets-on-second-time-lucky-with-migrant-workers-idUSKCN1AY1MZ)

SPONSORED



Merhawi Tesfay, an immigrant from Eritrea poses during a Reuters interview at German plant engineering firm Kremer Machine Systems where he found a job as electrician and plant manufacturer in Gescher near Muenster, Germany, August 4, 2017. Picture taken August 4, 2017. REUTERS/Wolfgang Rattay



Tilman Mues, managing partner of German plant engineering firm Kremer Machine Systems is pictured during a Reuters interview in Gescher near Muenster, Germany, August 4, 2017. Picture taken August 4, 2017. REUTERS/Wolfgang Rattay

Source <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-election-migrants-insight/germany-bets-on-second-time-lucky-with-migrant-workers-idUSKCN1AY1MZ>



Tilman Mues, managing partner of German plant engineering firm Kremer Machine Systems and his employee and immigrant from Eritrea Merhawi Tesfay during a Reuters interview in Gescher near Muenster, Germany, August 4, 2017. Picture taken August 4, 2017.

REUTERS/Wolfgang Rattay

Source: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-election-migrants-insight/germany-bets-on-second-time-lucky-with-migrant-workers-idUSKCN1AY1MZ>