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I applied for the Burns Fellowship after a work colleague and Burns alumna spoke in glowing terms about the experience she had had in Berlin a few years previously. Having a long-held interest in the modern history of Germany, I felt that the fellowship programme would present me with an opportunity to explore some stories in depth for Al Jazeera English, my home organisation, while also giving me an insight into how German media operate through my host organisation in Germany.

I felt mild trepidation after being accepted to the fellowship - I was concerned that having no German language skills would be a natural impediment to producing material, particularly when working in a German newsroom. I was therefore grateful that the Burns Fellowship offered two weeks of intensive German language training at the Goethe Institute. To those who are wary of applying to the Burns programme due to their lack of German - just apply regardless. I found the tuition offered by the Goethe instrumental in getting a feel for the German language and it also presented me with some useful insights into German society and culture.

With umlauts practiced and my pronunciation of 'entschuldigung' well-drilled, I turned up early on a warm Monday morning at the Berlin parliamentary bureau of the Rheinische Post, who kindly agreed to be my host for the early part of my placement. A few days prior to the placement I had had a few kolsch beers with Michael Broecker, who leads the bureau, and found him to be approachable, engaged and eager to help in any way that he could. On arriving at the office for the first time he immediately showed me around and introduced me to the team there. I felt like I was off to a good start.

I always intended to spend most of my placement working on freelance pieces but I figured it best to get straight out of the blocks on day one at the Rheinische Post - and focussed on writing an op-ed piece about Mitt Romney's selection of Paul Ryan as his running mate in the race for the US presidency. In the few days I had already spent in Germany I had noticed a fair bit of popular interest in the US election, so it seemed like a good subject to cover. In the event, there were obstacles with translation which meant that the two pieces I wrote for the Post didn't make it to print - but I tried to be sanguine about this. I was overwhelmingly focussed on writing a few articles in English as a freelancer, and on this side I was reasonably successful.

I found was that most Germans are reserved and stoic in comparison to people I have interviewed in the US, UK and Middle East, and this presented me with a few challenges. I found it more difficult to arrange, conduct and clear interviews with people in Berlin than in perhaps any other place I have worked, which came as a surprise to me. Some of the German fellows had advised me that in Germany the convention is for interviewees to check their comments prior to publication - something that is bordering on anathema among journalists working in the US and UK.

I also found that the press officers I approached for comment, background information or clarification were far slower to respond than what I have been used to in the United States. In nearly all cases, media relations teams took several days to get back to me - even after I made a few follow-up calls. This was something I was not prepared for, and I'd urge future Burns fellows who are working on feature articles to get their calls in to the relevant press offices in Germany as soon as they can - preferably before they even arrive in the country.

Nonetheless, I met some fascinating people in Berlin. I covered the eviction of around 50 artists from Kunsthaus Tacheles, an arts and media collective in the city's Mitte district. The owner of the building had ordered them to leave the building to clear the way for redevelopment. As the artists filed out one-by-one, many carrying their canvases and equipment, it became clear to me just how much Berlin has moved away from the heady, chaotic and yet artistically productive days of the early 1990s, following the fall of the Berlin wall. Berlin is now a lot more conventional and manicured than it was a few years ago. In the instance of Tacheles, I couldn't help but feel sadness at one change I felt had happened for the worse.

I also examined the problems faced by asylum seekers in Germany. It was striking to sit down with one gentleman who has faced a series of stressful challenges to his continued residency in Brandenburg, and who is now arguing to the German courts that his life is in danger if he is sent back to his native Pakistan. While it took a long time to line up a series of interviews with officials advocating for improved asylum and immigration rights, my investigation really gelled when I was lucky enough to get an interview with Hussain and hear his story. As in any country, there's no substitute for hearing a person's story and reflecting it for the benefit of a readership.

In all, I was pleased to produce three big features for Al Jazeera English that drew hundreds of page views and which were widely shared on social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter. The Burns Fellowship gave me the chance to live in and examine a country that is constantly and rapidly evolving - particularly at a time when the

Eurozone is in such a parlous state. I'm grateful to the ICFJ for being granted the opportunity to explore one of the world's great cities - and write about it.

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**Published:**

Tolerated asylum seekers troubled in Germany (Al Jazeera)

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/10/2012103819182372.html>

Famed Berlin art gallery fades away

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/09/20129545322471424.html>

German publishers in online copyright fight

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/08/20128207532338270.html>

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**Written for Rheinische Post, but unpublished:**

1. Piece about presidential election voting among US expats in Germany:

After the Republican Party formally nominates Mitt Romney as its candidate for the US presidency this week, the race for the country's highest office will enter its most decisive phase. In two-and-a-half months millions of Americans will cast their ballots to decide whether incumbent Barack Obama or his challenger will sit in the White House come January.

In 2008 Obama defeated Republican John McCain by a huge margin, taking the largest number of votes for a presidential campaign in US history. But this time Mitt Romney is expected to push Obama much harder in the swing states, where thousands of voters remain undecided on who to support come polling day.

The rival campaigns are thus concentrating on how best to maximise the vote in their favour in these battleground states, but they are also looking to influence an oft-neglected voting bloc - thousands of American voters living and working abroad.

Many of those American expats have settled in Germany. There are no precise data on how many US citizens are living here but the most conservative estimates put the number well into five figures, even when considering the presence of US military troops and their families alone.

Two American organisations in Germany are aiming to convince these expats to cast their vote in favour of Obama or Romney on November 6. Democrats Abroad Germany has nine separate chapters across the country, including Berlin, Munich and Hamburg. Republicans Abroad Germany also has several offices open but is not directly linked to the Republican Party, unlike its rival which is umbilically tied to the Democrats.

"We aren't affiliated with the Republican National Committee, while the Democrats Abroad get funding from the Democratic National Committee. We raise our own funds - as such, anything we say is by definition our own opinion. Technically there is no affiliation to the Republican Party," says Thomas Leiser, the chairman of Republicans Abroad Germany.

Republicans Abroad appears to have undergone a period of restructuring in the run-up to this year's presidential election. Mr Leiser has been chairman of the organisation for the last year and in that time has been tasked with getting new senior members on board and overhauling the group's operations.

"We are relatively small. We might have 250 to 300 members in Germany. We're doing our best to expand. For what it's worth, due to German regulations it took us a while to get the reporting in order. There had been a lapse somewhere in line and when I took over the first chore was to file the necessary documents," he says.

The Democratic Party hasn't had the bruising internal fight to select a candidate for the presidency this year, which may explain why Democrats Abroad Germany appears so well-organised. It is under the umbrella of a regional team that focuses on Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. Two other Democrats Abroad groups are charged with handling the Asia-Pacific and Americas regions, giving the entire organisation a global outlook.

The chairman of the Berlin chapter of Democrats Abroad Germany says their efforts are concentrated on getting hundreds of US expatriates registered to vote for the election in November, as part of a wider effort across Europe to boost support for the Democrats.

"We of course support President Obama and we support getting Democrats elected in the Senate and in the House of Representatives," Nancy Green says.

"Democrats Abroad is not the same entity as the Barack Obama presidential campaign but many of our members participate in the Obama campaign, as we did in 2008."

While Democrats Abroad Germany has led own initiatives in Germany, it has also brought together teams in other countries across Europe in a bid to bolster support.

"Recently from June into July, the DA German chair Craig Williams initiated what was called the Road Trip," Green says.

"A group of people travelled around our entire region, stopping almost every day in a different city, setting up voter registration. This was Europe wide, across 27 cities. It started in Munich and then went to London, Berlin and other places.

"At any given time there were eight or nine people in this van. That was a major effort from our region."

A recent change in US electoral regulations means that many US citizens now have to re-register for each election - and now Democrats Abroad and Republicans Abroad are going from city to city to ensure that as many Americans as possible have their ballot papers ready so that they can vote.

"The US changed the regulations - it used to be that you would register to vote and it would roll-over automatically for successive elections," Leiser says.

"It's not impossible but it does require some effort. You have to get an application form for an absentee ballot, fill it out and send it in, making sure you get in back in time. Then you have to send out your ballot in the proper time through the international mail. It's more difficult than it needs to be.

"We inform everybody we can about this - I work with the US Consul General, who has a programme to ensure that all who wish to be registered are registered. Our counterparts at Democrats Abroad do as well. The Consul-General tells us what is involved, there is some training in the form a 400-page manual. Then if anyone gets in touch with me and asks a question, I can tell them where to go."

The Democratic Party and the campaign team for Barack Obama used social media and the internet to great effect in 2008, and now Democrats Abroad has a website that aims to make it easier for expatriates to get their ballot papers.

"We send people to a website called [Votefromabroad.org](http://Votefromabroad.org). You can use that site regardless of your party affiliation. If you are an American living abroad you can go to that site and do all the paperwork needed to register there," Green says.

The effort to secure as many votes as possible among US citizens living in Germany is a reflection of the close nature of a presidential race in which the two candidates have widely differing ideas on how best to boost the sagging US economy. Expatriates in Germany are relatively detached from the impact of widespread unemployment in the United States, but they are still closely examining how the two candidates' economic policies may impact on their lives in Germany.

Mr Leiser says that during his conversations with American expatriates, the issue of taxation is raised time and time again. He argues Romney's pledge to reduce taxes will find favour among expatriates who have to file taxes in both Germany and their native land.

"I pay German tax and then in addition I pay US tax - I'm given credit for what I pay in Germany and there are certain exclusions, but even on a good day it is very complicated," he says.

"Anyone who is an expat who deals with US taxes knows it is a pain in the behind because it puts the onus on the American to prove his or her banking relationships and prove it is compliant with US regulations. The paperwork involved is extremely onerous. I was at a debate recently and when I brought up the subject my Democrat opponent said he is against it also.

"I think for an expat, the immediate thing that affects him the most is what is in his left hip-pocket, and with the current tax code there are many German banks that don't want to deal with Americans because of the reporting requirements that have been foisted on them."

As the incumbent, Obama arguably has a harder job to convince millions of Americans that he is the best person to move the economy forward and get people back to work. Green concedes that Obama cannot inspire the level of devotion shown by supporters throughout the 2008 election campaign, but she says expats in Germany are only now beginning to really take an active interest in the election.

"In 2008, the excitement was just electric. Also, Germany was so excited about Obama. That kind of outward showing of enthusiasm will be different this cycle," she says.

"I notice that the excitement is starting a bit later than last time but I'm beginning to get more telephone calls and more members. I feel the enthusiasm is mounting. But the issues are so crucial and the parties are now so polarised. Everyone's vote is so important."

Yet Green's counterpart at Republicans Abroad is confident and says he has noticed a shift in support towards the Grand Old Party and Mr Romney.

"In 2008 I was not so actively involved in the Republican organisation but from the events I went to it was overwhelmingly in favour of Obama," he says.

"I see that far less now. Part of that may be that my circle of friends has changed and I now know more Republicans to talk to. But just talking to people socially here, it seems there are more Republicans here than in 2008."

Both organisations now have fewer than ten weeks left to get as many potential supporters on board as possible. Many of the US expatriates in Germany are registered in swing states, and maximise the expat vote in favour of Obama or Romney could prove a deciding factor, as Green points out.

"The closest race that overseas ballots influenced was when Al Franken won the Senate seat for Minnesota in 2009," she says.

"They had to hold a recount and he won by 321 votes. So the overseas ballots are very important."

#### 1. Op-ed on selection of Paul Ryan as Mitt Romney's running-mate:

In recent months US Republican Paul Ryan had been repeatedly asked whether he would accept any invitation from presidential candidate Mitt Romney to join him on the ticket against President Barack Obama in the autumn.

Time and time again the 42-year-old Wisconsin congressman demurred. Analysts on the news networks moved on to other Republicans in the running for the vice-presidential candidacy. Romney had to go for someone steady, they said. Someone not too flashy. A tried-and-tested career politician who wouldn't outshine Mitt, himself a Republican that even staunch Republicans can't get excited about.

Yet it was Ryan after all who was introduced by Romney as his partner on the deck of the USS Wisconsin on Saturday. The architect of a Republican budget plan that aims to slash the US federal deficit, he's a major star in the GOP firmament. He's intelligent, driven, and in love with detail - qualities that opposition Democrats fear and respect in equal measure. With Romney's campaign so far failing to clearly articulate how his economic strategies will benefit the average American, having a fiscal policy geek as his partner appears to make good sense. Yet Romney's decision is also fraught with risk for his campaign.

Ryan is, to all intents and purposes, an ideologue. His distaste for what he deems the enlarged US federal government is the main driver of his 'Path To Prosperity' budget plan. He wants to cut a massive \$5.3 trillion from the budget deficit over the next ten years, arguing that it is the only way to pull the US back from the brink of economic ruin, while boosting economic growth and jobs.

The health care programme for senior citizens known as Medicare is targeted by Ryan's plan - he wants to eventually replace the scheme with a voucher system that critics say won't be enough to keep up with the rising cost of private health insurance. Medicaid, a programme which provides basic healthcare to the poor, is also on the chopping block. Ryan wants to slash spending on transportation and education as well as a wealth of other social programmes for the needy, such as food stamps - which are claimed by 46 million Americans. Yet parts of government considered

sacrosanct to Republican ideologues will be left untouched. The Defense Department will face no reductions under the Ryan plan, even as the country pulls its troops out of the costly war in Afghanistan.

Ryan won't countenance the idea of tax increases alongside a package of milder spending cuts. Rather, he wants to reduce taxes - particularly for high earners. The top rate of income tax would drop to 25 percent under his plan, while taxes on capital gains, dividends, estates and interest will be eliminated.

This is precisely where the Obama campaign will attempt to strike Romney throughout the course of the presidential race. Income tax cuts for all Americans that were instituted during George W Bush's presidency have been extended several times already, but now the president is seeking to make a distinction between working and middle-class Americans and the high rollers. He wants Americans who earn more than \$250,000 to be exempt from any further extensions to the Bush-era tax come January.

Romney's made a bold choice in Ryan, but he's also put himself in a tricky position, one that he has to navigate with a level of political acumen far greater than he has shown thus far in this campaign. He is now ideologically wedded to the author of a plan that aims to preserve tax benefits for the rich while simultaneously cutting deeply into the living standards of millions of working class and middle class Americans. That's going to be a hard sell with American unemployment at 8.3 percent, regardless of Obama's lacklustre record on tackling joblessness.

Ryan says his budget plan is designed to steer the US away from the very kinds of austerity measures that have been instituted across Europe, and that swift passage of his proposals is needed to avert the economic crises that are roiling Eurozone members such as Greece, Spain and Portugal. But with deep spending cuts woven into the very fabric of Ryan's plan there are concerns that such measures will throttle economic demand and only succeed in tipping the US back into recession - just as in austerity-hit Eurozone members. And with the entire world focussing on this election race, Obama will not pass up the opportunity to talk of how Ryan's plan could affect the interconnected global economy.

Throughout his presidency Obama has said that global solutions are needed to tackle the worst global downturn since the 1930s. He has led efforts to pressure Germany into paying more into the Eurozone bailout fund and now one should expect him to denounce Ryan's budget plan as an isolationist programme that will completely throttle the already precarious global economy. While Ryan's budget plan is focused exclusively on tackling US economic problems, Obama will doubtless argue that his administration has considered how to tackle the domestic debt while remaining responsible to the needs of other major economies.

Governments across Europe will be watching nervously as the race for the US presidency gets up to speed. Last week they perhaps wondered just what Romney stood for, and how he would appeal to voters disappointed with Obama. Now that they have seen Romney choose the architect of a budget plan that even many hardcore Republicans consider too harsh, European finance ministers may be wishing they remained in blissful ignorance.