

Germany: Young refugee commits suicide in deportation centre

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The suicide of a Georgian refugee in a Hamburg deportation centre graphically expresses the contempt for human life on the part of the city's Senate—a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union and the Greens.

David M., a citizen from Georgia, hanged himself in his cell on March 7. He had been taken to the city's deportation centre although he had informed the authorities in his application for asylum that he was just 17 years old. The arrest of a juvenile in Germany merely because he lacks proper papers is a breach of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

At the beginning of February, David M. had stopped a police patrol in Hamburg because he wanted to make an application for asylum. Since he had already requested asylum in Poland and Switzerland, the Dublin II agreement came into force, whereby he could be automatically deported back to the European country where he had made his initial application.

Immigration authorities routinely assume that refugees seek to avoid deportation. The refugees are therefore incarcerated in deportation centres, although often the only problem is that they cannot understand the complicated asylum rules prevailing in the European Union. David M. was taken to the Hahnöfersand juvenile detention centre to await his deportation.

When David M. realised the hopelessness of his situation, he began a hunger strike on February 9. On February 25, he was transferred to a remand centre hospital where he received the news that his deportation to Poland had been decided upon and scheduled for March 9. On March 6, he is said to have accepted solid food, but one day later, he tore up the sheets of his bed and hung himself.

David M. is a victim of the inhumane German asylum and immigration law on which he had set his hopes. He had fled to western Europe hoping to leave behind the fear and misery he had encountered in his homeland only to experience the manner in which the basic rights of foreign workers are abused in Germany.

Two days after the suicide, Hamburg Senator of the

Interior Christoph Ahlhaus (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), expressed his “deep regret over the death of the young man,” but his sympathies were implausible. Hamburg has long since had a reputation for the ruthlessness with which its authorities carry out deportations, even if the refugees are under-age. It is clear that nothing has changed in the city since the Greens joined the Senate coalition headed by Mayor Ole von Beust (CDU).

In 2008, the organisation “Young People without Borders” named Interior Senator Ahlhaus “Deportation Minister,” because Hamburg occupied first place amongst German states for deportations that year—more than 1,300. The figures tell only half the story, however. Hamburg also stands out for its inhumane treatment of refugees. For his part, Ahlhaus arrogantly accepted the nomination by “Young People without Borders” as a “compliment” and boasted that “the Hamburg immigration authorities are consistent in carrying through law and order.”

In plain language, this means that the Hamburg authorities are determined to utilise every loop hole in an effort to get rid of unwanted refugees. Hamburg is also to the fore in carrying out deportations to Iraq, Afghanistan and other crisis zones of the world.

Although the UN convention on children's rights prescribes that the well-being of a child has to be taken into account in the handling of children and young people, juveniles without parents are persistently criminalised in the city and locked up in deportation centres. This is possible due to an objection raised by the German federal government at the ratification of the UN convention, to the effect that the well-being of the child should cease to be an ameliorating factor in the case of immigrants. In other words, the deportation of under-age refugees has priority—irrespective of the specific needs or problems of such young people who in many cases have been traumatised by events in their past.

While the deportation of young people is a general practice in other German states, the immigration authorities in Hamburg go one step further by systematically distrusting

the age given by children and young people.

“If the authority suspects the young person is older, then he or she is sent to the university hospital,” explained Conni Gußler from the Hamburg refugee advice council. At the hospital, the child’s teeth, jawbones and clavicles are examined and the hands x-rayed. According to one expert, only Hamburg carries out such a practice. Such methods are highly controversial and have no proven scientific standing, according to the opinion of the German Congress of Physicians in 2007.

It is also the case in Hamburg that the task of determining the age of a juvenile offender is not carried out by the courts or youth welfare officers but rather directly by the immigration authorities, who have a direct interest in designating juveniles as adults in order to be able to deport them as rapidly as possible, or identify them as 16-year-olds, who then come under the jurisdiction of asylum law. Hamburg also does not allow any appeal against the designation of the age of a refugee. On this basis, half of the incarcerated refugees in the city were declared to be adults last year.

Even if David M. were aged 25 years, as the Georgian embassy alleges, it does not change the fact that the authorities in Hamburg bear the full responsibility for his death. “Instead of acknowledging the rights and the need to protect young people, as is the legal right of juvenile unaccompanied refugees, they are isolated without interpreters, deported or declared to be adults on the basis of a fictitious date of birth,” commented Hermann Hardt of the Hamburg Refugee Advice Council on the practice of the local authorities.

The refugee organisation Pro Asyl has also attacked the anti-refugee policy prevalent throughout Europe, which has taken grotesque forms since the passing of the Dublin II agreement. The German government at the time—a coalition of the Greens and the Social Democratic Party led by Gerhard Schröder (SPD)—was especially active in pushing for the agreement. Situated in the middle of the continent, Germany had concluded that its ability to deport refugees to other countries where asylum-seekers had commenced their journeys would be strengthened considerably. As a result of the agreement, there is now a widely developed practice of deporting refugees to different countries across Europe before they are then subsequently deported to their country of origin.

This deportation madness makes little or no allowances for the special needs of children and young people, according to Karl Kopp, the European adviser of Pro Asyl: “The death of this young person shows that all legal devices aimed at protecting children have been repealed in Hamburg. Children and young people do not belong in prison and

should not be shuttled across Europe like cattle.”

The Green Party senator in Hamburg, Till Steffen, described the suicide of David M. as a “tragic event,” but such events are by no means rare. Between 1993 and 2008, no fewer than 150 refugees facing deportation committed suicide while 814 injured themselves in order to escape deportation or protest against it by means of a hunger strike.

The Hamburg senator of the interior has since ordered that refugees under age should no longer be detained in deportation centres, but this will do little to change the situation for the children and young people concerned. Juveniles convicted of a criminal offence are excluded from this ruling, while other under-age refugees are only to receive a short-term tolerance while remaining continually under threat of deportation.

The Greens in the Hamburg coalition have declared that they are “very pleased” with the new ruling, but in fact, their faction in the city’s Senate is fully implicated in the inhumane deportation practices carried out by the body. It should be recalled that such deportation practices have their roots in police laws first introduced by the National Socialists in 1938. The Greens would prepare a more satisfactory solution, one Green spokesperson claimed in comments to the press, but then raised, “What can we do, we are in a coalition?”

The Greens, which once proclaimed their adherence to human rights and anti-racism, have sacrificed any principles in order to stay in power and maintain political relations with the most conservative political forces. Not only did the former pacifist Greens play a crucial role in 1999 by supporting the NATO-led war against Yugoslavia and paving the way for the first-ever overseas combat mission by the German army in the post-war period, the party also backed the stringent immigration laws introduced by Otto Schily (SPD). As part of the Hamburg Senate, they are now active in implementing these laws. In this respect, the suicide death of David M. has changed nothing. Just a few days after David M.’s death, a 15-year-old refugee was deported from the city to Hungary.



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