

# Germany closes its borders to refugees

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Just two weeks after Chancellor Angela Merkel declared Germany was ready to accept refugees and was celebrated internationally for “Germany’s *Willkommenskultur* (welcoming culture)”, the government has closed the borders for refugees.

At a hastily called press conference at which no questions were allowed, Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière announced on Sunday night that Germany was again introducing border controls “in the next minutes”. To this end, he said he had dispatched hundreds of border guards to Bavaria, which shares frontiers with Austria and the Czech Republic. Rail traffic between Germany and Austria had been temporarily suspended on the instructions of the Austrian government, he said.

The aim of these dramatic actions was “to limit the current influx to Germany and to return to an orderly process of entry,” de Maizière said. Although he pledged that Germany would comply with the applicable international standards for the protection of refugees, he added that the country was “not responsible for the vast majority of the asylum seekers”.

He insisted that all EU member states would have to adhere to the Dublin procedures. These regulations prescribe that a refugee must remain and apply for asylum in the first European country he or she enters. Based on this criterion the vast majority of the tens of thousands of refugees who have come to Germany since the beginning of the month would have been refused admission.

The introduction of border controls had an immediate effect. Kilometre-long queues formed on the motorways into Germany, and on Monday no refugees disembarked at Munich Central Station, where in the course of the day on Sunday some 7,100 had arrived.

The closure of Germany’s borders triggered an international chain reaction. The Austrian government

announced that it would also introduce controls at its border with Hungary, deploying 2,200 soldiers for this purpose. The Czech government sent 200 additional police officers to the border with Austria, and the Netherlands intends to conduct random checks on incoming travellers from Germany.

The Hungarian government, which has faced international criticism over its brutal treatment of refugees, will close the last gaps in its 170-kilometre-long fence on the Serbian border and guard it with heavily armed soldiers. Now, there are also stricter police controls in the interior of the country.

On Monday on Budapest’s Heroes’ Square, Prime Minister Viktor Orban swore in almost 900 new border guards with the words: “We do not want such a movement of people on a world scale to change Hungary.”

As of today, Tuesday, refugees are being registered on Serbian soil by officers from the Hungarian Immigration Office and then locked up in camps which they cannot leave until their claim for asylum is decided. Those who refuse to be registered are not allowed into Hungary.

In Brussels on Monday, EU interior ministers decided to extend the military mission in the Mediterranean. While previously refugee boats were subject to observation and some were also repulsed, they will now be seized on the high seas, the smugglers arrested and the boats destroyed. In a third phase, operations are planned in the territorial waters and on the mainland of Libya and other African countries.

The victims of the border closures are tens of thousands of refugees who continue to flee to Europe from Syria and other war-torn countries. On Monday alone, as the German border was closed, 7,000 refugees from Hungary had arrived in Austria by 10am. On Sunday, 5,800 new refugees arrived in Hungary from Serbia, a new daily record.

After weeks of privation fleeing from oppression and death, these refugees are now being treated as powerless pawns in Europe. They are sent from one border back to another, detained and mistreated.

The conditions that prevail were described to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* by Annett Oertel, a volunteer from Munich, who is helping to look after refugees at the Serbian-Hungarian border. "There are no rubbish containers, no showers, no toilets, in their distress people complete their business anywhere. 'It stinks, it looks as though a mountain of rubbish exploded'", says Oertel, "but no one knows what to do with the waste and the call of nature. Meanwhile epidemics are threatened due to the disastrous hygienic circumstances."

The decision by the German government to close the borders was preceded by a despicable campaign in the media and by the governing parties. Above all, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), the conservative mouthpiece of the Frankfurt Stock Exchange, has agitated tirelessly against the refugees.

It is enough to quote the headlines of a few recent editorials to understand the general thrust of this campaign: "Do the Germans know what they are doing?" "So the boat does not capsize", "Border controls. The order of the day," "Refugee onslaught. Where is the Army?", or "East Europe is right". The Eastern European governments have almost unanimously refused to accept refugees.

*Die Zeit* pulled former Berlin SPD state finance minister Thilo Sarrazin out of the woodwork. The author of the racist pamphlet "Germany abolishes itself" extolled the benefits of "walls and fences" to protect materially advanced "civilizations and cultures against uncontrolled immigration". As an example, he cites the Great Wall of China and the Limes, which had protected the Roman Empire successfully "against the Teutons and other immigrants from the wilder areas over 400 years."

In the *FAZ*, Humboldt Professor Jörg Baberowski tried to outdo Sarrazin. In a guest commentary, he ranted about "the talk of a welcoming culture". Internal peace was "put at risk if morality and virtue are the only resources...from which the grounds for political action comes." The government must do what is the norm in classic countries of immigration: "They invite people when they are needed, and refuse those who

would only be a burden".

Within the coalition government, the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) in particular has spoken sharply against accepting refugees. CSU chairman and Bavarian state premier Horst Seehofer demonstratively invited Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán to a meeting of his party in order to show solidarity with his brutal attitudes toward refugees.

Both Seehofer and Orbán then praised the closure of the German borders. "We have great understanding for Germany's decision and declare our complete solidarity", Orbán told the tabloid *Bild*. "We understand that this decision was necessary in order to defend the mature values in Germany and Europe."

But even within the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), there was resistance to accepting refugees from the start. However, with an eye on the chancellor, who is also CDU chair, this opposition was somewhat muted. The opponents clearly include interior minister de Maizière and finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble. Now they have prevailed.

Merkel and the German government have embarked upon a course that hardly differs from Orbán's, with whom they work closely together. This also applies to the third party of government, the Social Democratic Party (SPD). In a letter to party members, SPD chairman Sigmar Gabriel expressly defended the return to border controls.

Merkel's hypocritical compassion for refugees was, as we noted at the time, primarily a response to the wave of support for the refugees among the population. She tried to capture these sentiments and turn them in a reactionary direction. The decision to seal the borders is a challenge to this widespread sentiment. It heralds a new phase of social attacks, national conflicts in Europe and imperialist wars in Syria and Libya.



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