

# German political establishment lines up against refugees

Christoph Dreier  
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While refugees have been welcomed with open arms by the population, the “welcoming culture” of Angela Merkel is nothing more than a hollow phrase used to cover up increasingly harsh measures against asylum seekers.

After the German government temporarily opened its borders at the beginning of September, it is now making a systematic effort to seal off Europe’s borders, deter refugees from entering and encourage a mood of hostility to foreigners. This is the approach not only of the Christian Social Union (CSU), which sets the right-wing tone, but also the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The Greens and the Left Party also support this course.

Only a few weeks after Merkel’s empty words of welcome, the government has begun working with the authoritarian regimes of Tayyip Erdoğan and Viktor Orbán to seal off the external borders of the EU. By closing off the route to Greece from Turkey through the Aegean, they are forcing even more refugees to undertake the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean. This will lead to thousands of new deaths.

The government has recently pushed for new legislation to speed up asylum procedures through parliament. The law—which lists additional “safe countries of origin” from which asylum seekers will not be accepted, restricts welfare support for asylum seekers and allows refugees to be held for longer periods in the central reception camps—will go into effect on November 1.

Conditions in refugee camps have already led to fatalities. Often the facilities are unsanitary and there are inadequate basic utilities such as heating. The camps are usually hopelessly overfilled, and there are parasites and frequent outbreaks of illness in entire camps. Such inhumane conditions are consciously used to deter refugees from arriving in Germany and to encourage them to leave.

On a daily basis, politicians and media commentaries warn that the “upper limit” has been reached and that “the mood” in the population is changing. In reality, both politicians and the media are working tirelessly to encourage right-wing and anti-foreigner sentiments, and to isolate the refugees.

Offers of assistance are turned away or blocked by bureaucratic means. When a few thousand racist Pegida demonstrators take to the streets, their slogans are broadcast on news programs (*Tagesthemen*) at prime time. On the other hand, volunteers who help refugees, and even the refugees themselves, are almost never provided with a voice in the media.

Bavarian Finance Minister Markus Söder (CSU) and Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière (CDU) have resorted to the kind of propaganda usually only propounded by the far right.

When ten thousand refugees arrived in Germany—desperate, sick and without means—de Maizière told ZDF, “there are already so many refugees who believe that they can go anywhere. They leave their facilities, they order a taxi, and—astoundingly—have the money to travel through Germany. They go on strike because the lodgings do not please them, they get angry because the food does not please them and they come to blows in asylum application institutions.”

Although the traumatized refugees in many camps are crammed together like animals and have neither privacy nor employment opportunities, de Maizière is implying they are responsible for the tensions that are the inevitable consequence. The minister explicitly forbade any criticism of the overfilled camps as “inadequate.” Moreover, he imputed criminal intentions to the refugees when he demanded an “arrival culture” and respect for “our legal system.”

On Friday, the interior minister explained his hostility to the refugees, saying he quite consciously wanted to send a

“hard, unfriendly message” to refugees who did not intend to stay. Among these he also included refugees from Afghanistan. In an interview with the *Tagesanzeiger*, he presented them as ungrateful because they did not appreciate the German engagement in Afghanistan.

De Maizière said it angered him that so many refugees came from Afghanistan. “After all, we have been there for more than 10 years with soldiers and police in order to stabilize the country.” He said this after the intentional bombardment of a hospital in Kunduz had once again underscored the criminal character of the NATO war. The German army itself was responsible for a massacre of civilians in Kunduz in 2009, in which 142 people were killed.

On Saturday, Markus Söder spoke in favor of abolishing the individual right to asylum. He neglected to mention the historical background of this right, which is anchored in the German post-war constitution as an answer to the Nazi regime. “We demand a massive limitation on immigration,” said Söder. He implied that refugees break the rules and said “whoever comes to us has to adapt to our rules—not the reverse.”

Representatives of the SPD agreed with this campaign and spoke in favor of restrictions on the right to asylum. “We need more heart... and more understanding when it comes to immigration,” said SPD fraction head Thomas Oppermann. “A part of this is that there have to be limits to the intake capacity,” he said.

Oppermann expressed openness to a law proposed by de Maizière to create transit zones on the German border. In such zones, refugees were supposed to be intercepted and held so that they could be deported quickly. “I am very much in favor of the accelerated procedures and think that we must view the options without prejudice,” said Oppermann.

SPD head Sigmar Gabriel spoke about factual limitations on “the capacity of cities and communities.” In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, he pushed for a “defining culture” to which refugees would have to adhere. This xenophobic concept of a “defining culture” was first introduced by the right-wing CDU members Friedrich Merz and Jörg Schönholm in 2000 and was selected as “non-word of the year” in Germany. Now the head of the SPD is using it. At the same time, Gabriel announced that he would do everything “to bring about an end to the civil war in Syria and defeat the IS,” a scarcely disguised call for military intervention.

The action taken by the government against refugees

has also received the support of both opposition parties. At the federal and regional summit on refugees, the majority of the Green Party voted in favor of the new asylum law, which cuts social services and facilitates deportations.

In the Berlin newspaper *Tagesspiegel*, the head of the Green fraction in the European Parliament, Rebecca Harms, spoke in favor of sealing off Europe from refugees. A binding system of quotas for the distribution of refugees in the European member countries “assumes that the EU countries can control how immigration takes place,” said Harms. The planned camp for registering refugees on the external borders of the EU would have to “become part of an orderly strategy of the European Union,” she insisted.

European parliamentary representative Sven Giegold (Green Party) also said that the securing of the external borders of the EU and the falling away of border controls within Europe were two sides of the same coin. “Well organized borders include the right to safe entrance for asylum and protection,” he cynically added.

The majority of the Left Party rejects the new law, but central figures in the party have agreed to implement it. Bodo Ramelow, minister president of the state of Thuringia, who is personally responsible for the dire conditions in the refugee camps in his own state, supported the law. “I view most of the asylum compromise as acceptable. We are not engaged in an ideological debate, but have a job to do,” he told the *Thüringische Landeszeitung*.

Ramelow spoke in favor of an acceleration of the asylum procedure and promised to deport the rejected refugees quickly. “When it comes to deportations, there is no special road for Thuringia,” he said.



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