

# Germany's Grand Coalition split over how to drive back refugees

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While thousands of refugees risk their lives to cross the Mediterranean each day to commence an arduous journey through the Balkans, the governing coalition in Berlin is fighting over the most effective way to send them back.

Over the last weeks, the Bavarian Minister-President and Christian Social Union (CSU) Chairman Horst Seehofer and several regional Christian Democratic Union (CDU) leaders sharply attacked the policy of Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) and demanded the sealing-off of German borders.

During an 11-hour discussion held over the weekend, in which CDU fraction leader Volker Kauder, Gerda Hasselfeldt (CSU) and Chancellery Chief of Staff Peter Altmaier (CDU) also took part, Merkel and Seehofer adopted a joint program to set up border transit zones in which refugees would be detained and processed.

The Social Democratic Party (SPD) rejected this course of action. A meeting on refugee policy involving all three coalition parties was broken off after just two hours without success. Since then, the CDU/CSU and the SPD have leveled accusations against each other.

Federal Minister of Justice Heiko Maas (SPD) accused the CDU/CSU of wanting to create “detention zones” and “mass prisons” at the German borders. Maas declared the SPD “would not go along with this.” Rheinland-Palatinate Minister-President Malu Dreyer (SPD) accused her Bavarian counterpart Seehofer of “making a racket.”

Former Interior Minister Hans-Peter Friedrich (CSU) shot back, accusing the social democrats of disqualifying themselves to govern. The SPD would have to agree to the transit zones if they “still had any sense of responsibility.”

This noisy dispute conceals the fact that the differences between the CDU/CSU and the SPD are

minimal. The SPD rejects the transit zones because they do not believe they are practical. To prevent refugees who have been refused entry from illegally crossing unsecured borders, the transit zones would have to be turned into enormous concentration camps and all of Germany's external borders would have to be hermetically sealed.

“Practically speaking, that is only conceivable with giant camps in which entire families, men, women and children, are locked up,” commented immigration commissioner Aydan Özguz (SPD).

SPD Chairman Sigmar Gabriel complained that only a small fraction of newly arriving asylum seekers came from Balkan states considered to be “secure countries of origin.” “What sense would it make to establish transit zones for 2.4 percent of the refugees?” asked Gabriel, adding that “better registration, management and deportation” is what matters.

The SPD therefore proposes a different solution for reaching the same goal: so-called entry centers.

Entry centers, like transit zones, would register and process refugees and—when they had little prospect of a right to stay—immediately deport them. But unlike transit zones, they would lie within Germany's borders. To force refugees into the centers, the right to asylum and social benefits would be forfeited by those who do not report to the sites.

“All refugees would have to allow themselves to be registered at the entry centers. Anyone not following this rule would be at a disadvantage during their proceedings and be threatened with cuts to their benefits,” said Maas of the SPD's demands. Thomas Oppermann, chairman of the SPD parliamentary fraction, told *Der Spiegel* the SPD certainly rejected prison camps: “Independently of that, however, we must quickly assert ourselves with regard to border

controls and provide orderly conditions for entry into Germany.”

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CDU vice federal chairman Thomas Strobl, a CDU right-winger, concluded: “We aren’t so very far from each other.” Whether the camps are ultimately called transit zones or entry centers, the message is the same: “Do not come to Germany. We will very quickly send you back home.”

The fierce public dispute is the cover under which official politics are shifting even further to the right. Demands which just a few months ago were reserved for extreme right-wing politicians, such as the strict deportation of unrecognized asylum applicants and the construction of enormous internment camps, are today supported by all the established parties. Last month, parliament and the federal council, in which the Greens have a blocking minority, drastically tightened asylum laws. And in many municipalities, like SPD-controlled Berlin, refugees are systematically harassed.

The Greens and the Left Party are also involved in this shift to the right. When Chancellor Merkel was attacked by Seehofer, representatives for the Greens and the Left Party praised her to no end.

“I’m glad that Angela Merkel, in a world of disorder, tries to keep a clear head,” said the Green Party’s Claudia Roth on Saturday, when Merkel and Seehofer were already sitting down together to work out their joint paper on the transit zones. Left Party fraction leader Sahra Wagenknecht declared that Germany needs a government which “finally takes responsibility.”

This rightward shift is not only a reaction to the refugee crisis. The turn toward a militarist foreign policy “commensurate with the importance of our country in the world” (President Gauck) and the attempt to dominate Europe are inseparably bound up with the return of authoritarian forms of rule within Germany. The attack on the rights of refugees is only the prelude to attacks on the democratic rights of the entire working population.



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