

# What is behind the growing criticism of German Chancellor Angela Merkel?

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Attacks on Angela Merkel have increased in recent days in the media and from leading politicians. The German chancellor, whose position seemed unassailable a few months ago, could now prematurely lose office.

The tabloid *Bild am Sonntag* appeared last weekend with the headline, “Is Merkel still the right one?” The *Berliner Tagesspiegel* claims, “The majority says: We cannot do it”. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* writes about “Merkel’s fateful days”. And *Der Spiegel* titled its report on domestic politics, “The clock is ticking”.

The events on New Year’s Eve in Cologne, when groups of foreigners are alleged to have sexually assaulted hundreds of German women, have increased doubts about the Chancellor’s refugee policy, *Der Spiegel* wrote. In the Christian Democratic Party/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), desire for a different policy was growing, “if need be, without Merkel”.

On Monday CSU chief Horst Seehofer repeated his ultimatum that the chancellor had until March “to re-establish orderly legal conditions at the borders”. Otherwise, the Bavarian state government would file suit with the Supreme Court against the federal government, in which the CSU itself is a member.

On Tuesday a so-called “urgent letter on refugee policy”, signed by 44 CDU/CSU parliamentary deputies, arrived in the Chancellery. The five-page letter from the government’s own parliamentary faction accuses the chancellor of breaking the law. According to the *dpa* press agency, it says, “our country faces excessive demands. Therefore, we believe a change in current immigration practices...is urgently needed, through a return to the strict application of existing legislation”.

According to press reports, the number of those calling for Merkel to change course is clearly higher than the number of signatories. Overall, some one hundred CDU/CSU deputies support the demand for closing the country’s borders and for expedited deportations. That is about one-third of the CDU/CSU parliamentary faction. Among them are former CDU economic policy experts like the chairman of the

parliamentary group *Mittelstand* (Medium-sized business), Christian von Stetten, one of the initiators of the letter, and Carsten Linnemann, chairman of the CDU/CSU *Mittelstand* Association (MIT).

Media reports and commentators argue that the growing criticism of Merkel is a response to a change of mood in the population. Parliamentary deputies were being “bombarded” with letters and e-mails “from citizens” demanding a tightening of the policy on refugees, they claim.

In truth, it is precisely the opposite. It is the result of a targeted campaign from the top, staged by influential political circles, the media and business organizations, in order to enforce a sharp political shift to the right.

A few weeks ago, at the CDU party conference, the chancellor herself emphasized that her statement, “We can do it”, which is often interpreted as a “welcoming culture” and invitation to refugees, would not stand in the way of brutally deterring and deporting refugees, as well as increased military intervention in Syria and other countries. To the applause of delegates, she presented a ten-point programme on refugees, providing for more and expedited deportations, a limit on family reunifications, the elimination of so-called “perverse incentives”, and combating “causes of flight” through intensified military operations.

But for a growing part of the ruling class this is not nearly enough. The chancellor, whose brutal austerity measures have driven millions of people into misery in Greece and other countries, is considered too liberal and too lenient.

This is the context in which the events of New Year’s Eve at Cologne Central Railway Station have been exaggerated, and a bizarre media campaign instigated, for the purpose of creating a climate of fear and hysteria overnight and bringing about a drastic shift to the right of official politics. Criticism of Merkel’s refugee policy is only the trigger, the lever through which this shift to the right is to be enforced.

Merkel had previously pushed for a so-called “European solution” to the refugee crisis, to prevent the walling off of national borders and the blowing apart of the European Union in its present form. She wanted to seal off the EU’s

external borders more completely, intern the remaining refugees in so-called “hot spots”, and then distribute some to all EU countries.

But that did not work. Of the 160,000 refugees the EU agreed to distribute across its member states in the past year, only 322 have so far made the journey. Not only Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic have closed their borders and erected barbed wire fences, but also Sweden and Denmark, who were regarded as refugee-friendly, have reintroduced border controls.

In Germany too, the call for closing the borders is getting louder—not only from the CDU/CSU, but also from the ranks of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party. None other than former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) harshly attacked Merkel recently because of her refugee policies.

In the controversy over refugee policy, one development is visible, which can be described as the end of the liberal, democratic and social Europe. Twenty-five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the furor over the alleged “triumph of capitalism”, the European project lies in ruins.

The propaganda speeches about unity and understanding between nations, in democracy and freedom, have long fallen silent. The boastful strategies of the Lisbon agenda, through which the European Union should be made into the “most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world”, have all failed. The social division of Europe is now greater than ever. In many countries, one in two young people is unemployed.

The expansion of the European Union into Eastern Europe did not bring democracy and prosperity, but instead Orban in Hungary and Kaczyński in Poland, who openly profess their support for the authoritarian regimes of the 1930s. The European Union and the German government, which have transformed these countries into cheap workbenches for their corporations, destroyed their social welfare systems and imposed low wages and high unemployment, are responsible for ensuring that these right-wing nationalist forces found fertile ground.

All European governments are responding to the growing economic and political crisis and growing social tensions with a shift to the right—with militarism, the dismantling of democratic rights and the establishment of a police state.

In recent years, Merkel has significantly pushed ahead this reactionary policy and thus strengthened the most right-wing political forces. That she now comes under pressure from the ranks of her own party, and that the racist demagogues in Bavaria’s CSU pose ultimatums to her is the result of her own policies.

More and more influential economic spokespersons, politicians and academics are calling for a harder line in

foreign policy. Germany must once again take on the role of a leading power in Europe—a “hegemon” and “disciplinarian”—and intervene militarily around the world. With the call for German leadership in Europe, the call also returns for a “Führer” (leader).

Herein lies the source of the criticism of Merkel. Sections of the ruling class are of the opinion that she is not up to the new tasks of German imperialism. They are demanding more aggressiveness at home and abroad in order to enforce German interests.

The Merkel critics also include her Finance Minister, Wolfgang Schäuble. As the architect of German unity, who dictated the Unification Treaty in the crucial weeks following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, he has always advanced the view that Germany should take more advantage of its economic dominance.

Schäuble called early on for “more patriotism” and a “healthy national sentiment”. As the “country in the middle of the continent”, Germany had long had “a European calling”. More than twenty years ago, he advocated a “core Europe”, in which Germany set the tone. During the negotiations with Greece over the past year he made it clear that he was ready, in contrast to Merkel, to throw that country out of the euro zone, to set an example and make clear who calls the shots in Europe.

Last weekend, in an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Schäuble delivered one of his well-known proclamations of loyalty for the Chancellor. It was drafted in such a way that everyone could hear his criticism of government policies. Then he demanded the deployment of the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) at home and an additional “gasoline tax” to finance the refugees, a demand which poured oil on the flames of the witch-hunt against the migrants.

But Schäuble is not the only one demanding a much harsher line against refugees. Vice-Chancellor and SPD leader Gabriel has demanded “rapid deportations and zero tolerance” towards criminal foreigners. In the business daily *Handelsblatt*, ex-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder emphasized that Merkel had for ten years rested on the successes of the government led by him and its “Agenda 2010” policies. A Social Democratic government was necessary, he said, in order to meet the challenges of the present situation.

The escalating criticism of Merkel is part of a major lurch to the right, and the preparation for great class battles.



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