

German chancellor demands stricter asylum laws and ban on burqa

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Just a few weeks ago, the *New York Times* called German Chancellor Angela Merkel “the last defender of Western freedom.” Following the election of Donald Trump, hopes for the defence of democratic principles relied more than ever on Merkel, the *Times* wrote in early November.

Merkel made clear on Tuesday what this amounts to. At the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party congress in Essen, she delivered an extraordinarily right-wing speech full of xenophobic attacks and demands for the strengthening of the police and military.

Previously, Merkel’s refusal to impose a firm upper limit for the acceptance of refugees, as the CDU’s Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), had urged, was portrayed as a “welcoming culture” toward refugees. This was always a misinterpretation.

In the interests of German big business, which has profited from the freedom of movement within Europe, Merkel has to date opposed the reinforcement of national borders and worked for a so-called “European solution” to the refugee crisis. The substance of this “solution” was the closure of Europe’s external borders. This was connected to a brutal policy of deterring refugees through the establishment of border protection units and mass deportations. Despite this, right-wing critics accused Merkel of endangering security and national sovereignty by refusing to impose national border controls.

Merkel began her speech Tuesday with a clear concession to her right-wing critics. She noted that Germany would never again accept several hundred thousand refugees in a matter of months, saying, “A situation like that in the late summer of 2015 cannot, should not and will not be repeated. That was, and is, my declared political goal.”

This was followed by a list of the measures to repulse refugees adopted by the German government over recent months. “We have produced a list of safe countries of origin,” she stated. It had been correct to categorise the Western Balkan states as safe countries of origin so as to make clear that the vast majority of the thousands of refugees from this region “have no prospect of staying with us.”

We live in a state under the rule of law, Merkel continued. Every refugee had the right to due process. But this process required that those who had no right to remain had to leave the country.

She then praised Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière (CDU), who had introduced refugee ID cards, restricted family reunifications in Germany and strengthened the deportation process.

Amid jubilation from the close to 1,000 delegates, Merkel hailed the grand coalition government’s integration law, designed to prevent the emergence of so-called “parallel societies.” She declared, “Here with us, that means show your face. The full veil is therefore not appropriate. It should be banned wherever this is legally possible.”

The CDU intends to ban the burqa wherever the identification of an individual is necessary—in the courts, at police checkpoints and on public transport.

Already in the summer, the interior ministers from the CDU/CSU spoke out in the “Berlin declaration” in favour of a partial ban on the burqa and niqab. At the time, Interior Minister de Maizière stated, “We reject the burqa. It does not fit in with our cosmopolitan society.” Wearing the full veil was “an affront to an open society and, in addition, anti-woman.” He wanted “everybody in our country to show his face.”

Merkel and de Maizière know very well that a ban on the burqa is incompatible with the right to freedom of

religion guaranteed in Germany's Basic Law. "The state is prohibited from evaluating such religious beliefs of its citizens, let alone describing them as right or wrong," ruled the Constitutional Court in 2015 in its headscarf ruling.

Merkel's demand for a burqa ban is part of a shift to the right, including an intensification of anti-refugee policies. The congress included in its main resolution large portions of an anti-refugee motion proposed by Baden-Württemberg's interior minister, Thomas Strobl.

The resolution called, among other things, for an "expansion" of "the reasons for detention prior to deportation... if a danger is posed by the person obliged to leave." It proposed an extension of the period rejected asylum seekers can be held in custody prior to their deportation from the current limit of four days to four weeks. This goes beyond a proposal from de Maizière to increase the limit on detention to two weeks.

The main resolution also declared its support for so-called "transit zones" as an "appropriate method of management while processing refugees' applications." When the far-right Hungarian government of Victor Orban legally sanctioned such camps and set them up on the country's borders in September 2015, Merkel opposed the action.

The congress also agreed that asylum seekers who had no prospect of staying should have their tolerated status removed if they provided "false information" or refused "to cooperate in the determination of their identification." Welfare benefits would immediately be cut, the asylum process halted, and a "document on the obligation to leave," i.e., to be deported, provided. Asylum seekers who spent their holidays in the country they fled in the face of "war and persecution" would lose their asylum status. Their travel documents would immediately be confiscated.

The right-wing offensive agreed upon at the CDU congress comes in response to the rapidly worsening economic and political crisis in Europe. The Brexit vote in June, the election of Donald Trump as US president and the rejection of the referendum in Italy have shaken official politics in Europe to its foundations.

In response to Trump's nationalist "America-first" policy, the German chancellor and her party are responding with their own nationalist and racist

offensive. On all fundamentals, the CDU is adopting the right-wing, xenophobic agitation of the Alternative for Germany (AfD).

The strengthening of the military and the state is to be intensified. While cuts are being carried out on social spending in all areas, virtually unlimited financial resources are being made available for the strengthening of the military, the militarisation of the police and the expansion of the intelligence agencies. Defence spending is to increase by €130 billion in the coming years.

To finance this vast build-up, the CDU congress agreed on strict budgetary discipline and an adherence to the debt brake.

These policies have produced ever-widening social devastation. In Europe, there are already 23 million people unemployed. Millions more work in low-wage jobs or irregular employment. Poverty is growing dramatically in Germany. Over 12 million people officially live in poverty. Children are affected particularly badly. Eight million people work in precarious conditions. By contrast, a tiny minority lives in the lap of luxury. Conditions have been created by the government for this minority to enrich itself at the expense of the vast majority.

The political establishment is adopting ever more openly racist and dictatorial methods so as to suppress the mounting opposition to its anti-social and militarist policies.

While Merkel warned repeatedly about the danger posed by the growth of the AfD, her xenophobic policies and the reactionary content of the resolution will result in a strengthening of the right-wing radicals. Not for nothing did AfD Deputy Chairman Alexander Gauland remark that the CDU resolution contained many of his party's positions. Prior to his AfD membership, Gauland was a CDU official for 40 years.



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