Arsonists attack refugee shelter in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Germany

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A fire at a refugee shelter in the town of Gross Strömkendorf near Wismar, Germany last Wednesday caused the near complete destruction of the former hotel. The fire broke out with 14 refugees in the building, including young children from Ukraine and three caregivers. It was only by chance that no one was injured.

It took the 120 firefighters deployed several hours to extinguish the blaze. Initial estimates put the damage to the building in the high six-figure range. The roof collapsed entirely. “Only the outer walls remain standing,” according to a district spokesman.

Although the course of events remains to be fully clarified, it is assumed the attack was arson based on radical right-wing motives. The State Security Service has taken over the investigation. Only two days prior to the fire, the shelter, operated by the German Red Cross, had been defaced with swastikas.

The incident has prompted revulsion among the population. Images of the house in flames inevitably recall memories of the arson perpetrated against Turkish families in the cities of Mölln and Solingen and the riots in Rostock-Lichtenhagen 30 years ago. That was where, in August 1992, a fascist mob attacked a housing complex for foreigners with over a hundred residents and, with the police looking on, unleashed a multi-day racist pogrom.

Since then there have been repeated attacks of refugee housing facilities. Official figures from 2020 registered more than 1,600 attacks against refugees and asylum seekers’ shelters. As recently as August a refugee shelter in Leipzig was attacked; again, it was only luck that no one was injured. Suspected right-wing extremists had thrown incendiary devices at a refugee shelter housing 220 people. Earlier this month another attempted arson at a shelter for 147 Ukrainian refugees in Apolda, Thuringia was only barely prevented by firefighters.

State and federal politicians rushed to condemn the incident in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. The state's prime minister, Manuela Schwesig (Social Democrats, SPD), toured the scene on Thursday. She tweeted afterwards that there must be “harsh consequences” if the suspicion of arson is confirmed.

Similar comments were sounded by her party colleague, German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser (SPD). “People who found shelter with us from Putin’s war had to be rescued from the flames. If arson is confirmed, this is an inhumane crime that will be prosecuted with all severity,” she wrote on Twitter.

“We condemn this presumably racially motivated attack in the strongest possible terms,” said regional Green Party co-chair Katharina Horn.

The sheer hypocrisy is intolerable. The fact is that the attack is the direct result of anti-refugee agitation engaged in by all establishment parties accompanying their war policies abroad and attacks on the domestic population. The most recent examples are the statements made by Christian Democratic (CDU) party leader Friedrich Merz and by Faeser herself.

At the end of September, Merz referred to Ukrainian refugees as “social tourists” on Bild TV. He complained of alleged commuting back and forth between Ukraine and Germany, collecting social security benefits.

Merz went on to warn of a wave of refugees from Russia “if the German government did what the federal minister of the interior has proposed, namely to provide access to the Federal Republic of Germany to practically all conscientious objectors to the mobilization in Russia.”

Merz engaged in tactical backpedaling when struck

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by a storm of indignation, but his refugee-baiting, in the style of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), is widespread among the ruling class. Unsurprisingly, Boris Palmer, the mayor of the city of Tübingen, who is known for his far-right outbursts, immediately backed Merz. Palmer was a longtime member of the Green Party, though he has suspended his membership.

Parts of the opposition CDU and its Bavarian sister party CSU also explicitly support Merz's statements. In a letter to Merz, the so-called Values Union demands an "immediate entry stop for all unauthorized persons." They call for the Bundeswehr (German military) to help seal the borders. The signatories speak of "hundreds, if not thousands of people" entering the country every day. Merz should not have backpedaled on his criticism, say the Values Union politicians.

Faeser, who as recently as last month had called Merz's statements "shabby" and "scoring political points at the expense of Ukrainian women and children who fled Putin's bombs and tanks," played the refugee policy firebrand herself in the days before and after the attack.

She said she had "concerns" due to rising numbers of refugees and called for a tougher approach. Last week, at a conference with representatives of the Western Balkan states, Faeser called for a stronger curb on "illegal migration" via the so-called Balkan route. "Serbia must change its visa practices, now and not someday," she demanded.

At the same time, she announced a "bundle of measures" to be taken. Border controls with Austria and the Czech Republic, for example, are to be continued. After "very serious talks," the two border countries promised to step up border controls at their national boundaries.

The SPD-led state government in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania has been responsible for implementing a particularly rigid deportation policy since 2015. Schwesig is seen as an outspoken proponent of faster asylum proceedings and deportations. Even in 2020, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, 521 deportations were ordered. In 199 cases, a "voluntary departure" was organized.

Until the end of last year, Schwesig led an SPD-CDU coalition, and though the coalition partner changed to the Left Party after the last state elections, the politics have remained the same. Deportations continue unabated; there, as in other German states, the Left Party fully supports the right-wing and inhumane refugee and immigration policies of the other parties.

Berlin, where the Left Party governs with the SPD and the Greens, is notorious for its nighttime raids in which refugees are deported as quietly as possible. In the state of Thuringia, where the Left Party heads the government, almost 100 people, including 37 children, were deported in the second half of 2021 alone.

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