

The Crans-Montana inferno: New findings prove the responsibility of local authorities

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One week after the deadly fire in Crans-Montana, it is becoming clear that this was not a tragic accident, but manslaughter driven by profit. The bar “Le Constellation” had been known for years as a deadly fire trap, without the authorities intervening or even carrying out inspections.

Italian Formula One manager Flavio Briatore, who himself operates several nightclubs, bars and restaurants in various parts of the world, told *Corriere della Sera*: “Do not talk to me about an accident, a tragedy or adverse circumstances—this was murder.”

In the Swiss ski resort, 40 people aged between 14 and 39 were burned beyond recognition on New Year’s Eve. A further 116 were injured, some of them critically. Eighty-three are still being treated in specialist clinics across Europe.

At a press conference on Tuesday, Nicolas Féraud, president of the municipality responsible for fire safety inspections, was forced to admit that the local authority bears joint responsibility for the catastrophe. The last inspection, Féraud said, had taken place in 2019. For five years, the bar had not been inspected.

However, even during the three inspections that took place between 2015 and 2019, the cheap insulation material on the ceiling of the bar was not considered important. The highly flammable material was ignited on the night of the fire by “fountain candles.” These were mounted on champagne bottles, emitting a bright flame, causing the inferno. Féraud justified the lack of inspection by stating that the law did not require the quality of the acoustic insulation material used to be checked during the regularly prescribed inspections.

As early as 2015, when the current operators took over the bar and carried out renovations, the authorities showed no interest in the foam mats on the ceiling of the basement. Nor did they concern themselves with the

only staircase leading to the basement, which had been narrowed during the renovation from 4 metres to 1.4 metres. The narrow staircase proved to be a deadly trap for numerous victims. The French couple operating the venue, Jessica and Jacques Moretti, were only required to apply for a permit for renovation of the veranda, and had a free hand in the interior conversion.

Féraud also had to admit that the dangers posed by the ceiling had long been known. A newly surfaced mobile phone video from New Year’s night 2020 shows a waiter urgently warning guests of the risk of fire. The same fountain candles set alight at that time ignited the ceiling in the recent tragedy.

For the bar, which held up to 400 guests on the night of the fire, only a single fire extinguisher was required, which, according to Féraud, was present. Whether it was actually used, the municipal president could not say. Nor could he confirm whether an emergency exit was accessible and open.

Féraud, a member of the right-liberal FDP, claimed that he would have acted immediately if he had known earlier about the party practices at the bar. When it was pointed out that the bar had advertised the fountain candles on its website, he replied that anyone was free to write whatever they wanted on their website.

Féraud also rejected any suspicion that bribery or cronyism had been involved. Neither he nor the responsible fire inspectors had personal relationships with the landlord couple, he claimed. Coming from the same man who only a few days earlier had asserted that the bar was inspected “annually or biennially,” this claim is of little value.

The reputation of the operator couple, initially described as “excellent,” meanwhile has also been damaged. French newspaper *Le Parisien* has revealed that Jacques Moretti was convicted in France 30 years

ago of pimping, deprivation of liberty, kidnapping and fraud, and spent some time in prison. The public prosecutor's office is now investigating the Morettis for negligent manslaughter, negligent bodily harm and negligent causing of a major fire, but has so far issued no arrest warrant. The operating licence for a second restaurant in Crans-Montana has been withdrawn from the Morettis.

It has also now become clear why so many minors are among the victims, even though under cantonal law young people under the age of 16 are not permitted to remain in bars or restaurants after 10 p.m. without being accompanied by a parent, and they are prohibited from consuming alcohol. The bar "Le Constellation" was known for its lax admission controls. According to reports from young people, it was also possible to bypass the bouncer at the main entrance via a side door, the access code to which was known to insiders.

The new findings confirm what we wrote in the first article on the inferno in Crans-Montana: it is part of a chain of developments—the coronavirus pandemic, the increase in fatal workplace accidents, the genocide in Gaza, the reintroduction of conscription in Germany—in which profit or power interests take precedence over human lives.

The tourism industry, too, is increasingly dominated by profit-hungry, globally operating corporations. In the case of Crans-Montana, US corporation Vail Resorts, which owns all the ski facilities and several restaurants, plays this role. The authorities are put under pressure or bought off by them. Smaller actors, such as the Morettis, only prevail if they possess the required ruthlessness.



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