

Angela Merkel's Policy towards Refugees (2015)

Abstract

This newspaper article offers a chronology of the refugee movement, primarily from Syria and Afghanistan, which triggered controversial reactions in Germany in 2015 and prompted Chancellor Angela Merkel to take in the migrants who had been made homeless by the violent conflicts while assuring the German population that "We can do this."

Source

In the Eye of the Storm

Mass exodus to Germany: Never before have the stakes been so high – and Angela Merkel is betting it all. She is the crisis chancellor.

[...]

Since the beginning of May, a new story has been unfolding for Germany and for the chancellor – not as a big plan, but as a rapid sequence of actions and reactions. Events are constantly shifting from immediate facts to larger principles:

May 7, 2015: Federal Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière announces in Berlin that 450,000 refugees are expected to arrive in Germany this year.

August 19, 2015: The Interior Ministry revises this figure steeply upward, to 800,000. Between May and August, the situations in Syria, northern Iraq and Afghanistan worsen dramatically; hundreds of boat refugees die; Greece is completely consumed with its own problems; there's an election campaign in Turkey. Both countries simply wave through huge numbers of refugees.

Less than a week later, at a meeting of representatives from the Interior Ministry, the federal states and the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), someone asks the question: "What will we do with the people who come? Should we send them back to Hungary?" An agreement is reached: No, we can't do that.

August 25, 2015, at 4:30 a.m.: The BAMF confirms via Twitter (in German): "We are at present largely no longer enforcing #Dublin procedures for Syrian citizens." The tweet goes around the world thousands of times. Neither Angela Merkel nor Chancellery Minister Peter Altmaier, her chief of staff, know about it.

August 25, at around noon in the Marxloh neighborhood of the western German city of Duisburg: During an event on "living well," citizens tell the chancellor that the refugees are perceived as an "invasion."

August 25, 2015: In Heidenau, a small town in Saxony, an uninhibited mob calls Merkel a "traitor to the people" and a "whore."

August 31, 2015, in Berlin: Merkel holds her summer press conference. Austria and Hungary have deployed trains to transfer the influx of refugees to Germany. "We live in orderly, in very orderly circumstances," the chancellor said. "Most of us do not know the feeling of complete exhaustion combined with fear." The state will respond to excesses with the utmost severity, she goes on. "No experience in one's own life justifies this kind of behavior," she adds. Journalists ask questions. The

government wonders once again what it will do with the trains. The Chancellery decides to put the concerns of the Interior Ministry on the back burner and to not turn the trains away. After all, how is turning away the refugees coming from Hungary supposed to happen in concrete terms?

September 1, 2015: Syrians, Albanians and Iraqis shout “Germany, Germany!” and “Merkel! Merkel!” at a train station in Budapest.

When the chancellor sees this on television, she is touched.

September 3, 2015: Hungary halts the trains, so the refugees continue their journey on foot. They march alongside highways, on railway tracks, through meadows. They march toward Germany, to Merkel.

September 4, 2015: Germany's federal government reckons that the high point of the flood of refugees will be reached that weekend, that the refugees can no longer be held back. Merkel suspects that terrible images are also now imminent – images of run-over refugees, images of police taking action against distraught people, possibly even images of Hungarian soldiers. These are images, as one member of her cabinet puts it, “that Europe can’t allow itself to be associated with.”

September 5, 2015: Merkel speaks by telephone with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary and Chancellor Werner Faymann of Austria. Orbán says the situation is no longer under control. Merkel and Faymann decide to allow the refugees to leave Hungary. Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel, who also serves as minister of economic affairs and energy as well as chairman of the SPD, is included in the decision-making process, but the telephone conversation has more of a “briefing-like character.” The chancellor is on the move. Late in the evening, Merkel has Georg Streiter, her deputy spokesman, declare that Germany will not turn the refugees away. “We have now addressed an acute emergency,” Streiter says. No big speech to the nation, no big production marks this decision, which might possibly be the most important of Merkel's time in office. Pragmatism with historical consequences.

Back in July, Merkel had said to Reem, a 14-year-old Palestinian refugee living in northern Germany: “We can't accept everybody.” What has gotten into Merkel since then? The answer is: reality. Plus a big dose of global history – as the crises in the Near and Middle East are also consequences of European colonial policies, the upheavals are also an echo of September 11. Plus, perhaps, a dose of emotions. In the following week, refugees arrive in Munich almost hourly. “We can do this,” Merkel says.

September 13, 2015: Interior Minister de Maizière announces that Germany will reintroduce border controls. It's his suggestion, but it's been OK'd by SPD chairman Gabriel and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Confusion reigns for a few hours. Does this mean that the borders will be shut? Is the government backpedaling? From the outset, one hears in the Chancellery, it has been clear that the exception to Dublin needed to be limited, that one had to find a way back to an orderly procedure.

Thus, openness, but an orderly one. No change in course, just a slowdown. However, it's more of a symbolic slowdown meant to show Germany's European partners: We can also do this differently. The problem, as everyone knows, won't be solved with border controls.

September 15, 2015: The chancellor is in a defiant, defensive mode. When asked if she has contributed to the escalation herself, she says: “There are situations in which one can't think things over for 12 hours.” In these cases, she adds, one simply has to make a decision. Of course, those in her inner circle do everything they can to convey the impression that the chancellor is neither livid about the hostility she is facing nor stirred by the inundation of love from the refugees. At most, they admit that the chancellor is “impressed” by the readiness to help of her fellow countrymen and -women, who are fueling this yearning for Germany in the same way as the chancellor's selfies.

[...]

Source: Tina Hildebrandt and Bernd Ulrich, "In the Eye of the Storm," Die Zeit, Nr. 38./2015, 17. September 2015.

<https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2015-09/angela-merkel-refugees-crisis-chancellor>

Translation: Pam Selwyn

Recommended Citation: Angela Merkel's Policy towards Refugees (2015), published in: German History in Documents and Images,

<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-5284>> [January 27, 2025].