

# Angela Merkel faces a delicate balancing act on migration ahead of key state elections

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/02/15/angela-merkel-faces-a-delicate-balancing-act-on-migration-ahead-of-key-state-elections/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/02/15/angela-merkel-faces-a-delicate-balancing-act-on-migration-ahead-of-key-state-elections/)

2/15/2016

*Elections will be held in the German states of Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt on 13 March, with some commentators viewing the elections as an effective vote of confidence on Angela Merkel's policy on refugees. **Nitzan Shoshan** assesses the political response to the incidents which took place in Cologne and other German cities on New Year's eve. He states that while some of the issues raised by political actors, such as reforming Germany's laws on sexual assault, are undoubtedly justified, there is a danger of mainstream parties inadvertently legitimising the narratives of the German far-right.*



As recently as early summer 2015, in the heat of the Greek debt crisis, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel and Minister of Finance Wolfgang Schäuble faced comparisons with the Nazis and accusations of wrecking the EU, with the country being condemned for 'historical amnesia' and 'hypocrisy'. By the summer's end, as the dimensions of the so-called refugee crisis had become evident, the world was applauding a Germany that, unlike numerous other European countries, had learned from its history, showing solidarity in the face of immense suffering, while Merkel was praised for her commitment to a Europe of open borders.

Some have interpreted Germany's response as reflecting a deep sense of historical responsibility, others as a cynical maneuver for rehabilitating Merkel's blemished image. Another explanation, however, paints Berlin's seemingly erratic course as in fact rather coherent, consistently motivated by economic pragmatism rather than altruistic humanism or public relations ploys.

In both the Greek and the refugee crises Merkel enjoyed the support of dominant economic sectors and business interests. Any limits on movement within the Schengen countries threatens to impose huge costs on Germany's export-based economy, which depends in particular on the European market. Merkel thus has good reasons to resist stricter border controls and advocate a common EU policy. Forced to choose between economic deceleration and the challenges of mass migration, she decidedly favours the latter. Finally, Germany's broadly-acknowledged demographic deficits and the (at the time) wide domestic popularity of Merkel's refugee policy doubtlessly also played their part.

## Germany's migration dilemma

Merkel's description of what transpired in Cologne on New Year's Eve as a 'bombshell' is therefore hardly an overstatement. As is already well known, about 1,000 people, mostly young men, reportedly assembled near the city's cathedral and central train station. Several groups of 20-40 individuals each surrounded, sexually assaulted, and robbed women leaving the train station or crossing the square.

The magnitude of the events took time to sink in as complaints piled up. By mid-January Cologne's police, whose chief officer was sacked within a week of the incident, reported 766 complaints, 381 for sex crimes, and nearly 500 women who alleged to have suffered sexual assaults. According to police, all suspects have a migration background, the vast majority North-African. Numerous other German cities – including Munich, Stuttgart, Frankfurt, Düsseldorf, and Nuremberg – as well as cities in other countries such as Austria, Finland and Sweden, registered similar incidents.

The Cologne attacks exacerbated already existing tensions between Merkel and her critics within the CDU, where some have recently called for a daily cap on refugee entries and questioned the Chancellor's open-door policy,

potentially shaking her seemingly ironclad leadership. In particular, the CDU's sister party, the Bavarian CSU, has sharpened its attacks on Merkel, demanding a cap on refugee entries at 200,000 annually, down from over one million in 2015.

Members of the CDU fear potential losses of electoral support in upcoming state elections to the right-wing, Eurosceptic Alternative for Germany (AfD), a vociferous advocate of strict controls over national borders (a demand in line with the party's broader agenda against the EU's encroachment on national sovereignty). Founded in 2013 and scoring early electoral successes, the AfD had until not long ago been considered washed up, but has recently shown significant gains in the polls.

On the streets, the 'Pegida' (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West) movement, also presumed by many to have imploded into insignificance, has similarly risen from the ashes. Attracting massive media coverage in the winter of 2014-15, Pegida had subsequently witnessed its numbers plummet and had all but vanished from international news. Turnout at its rallies, however, rebounded forcefully during the late fall of 2015 as the refugee crisis showed no sign of abating.

Since New Year, two separate demonstrations in Cologne and in Leipzig have spiraled into violence and riots, including organised attacks on foreigners. While authorities as well as NGOs have registered escalating racist violence for a while, such developments raise acute public worries about a new resurgence of right-wing extremist brutality. Racist crimes more than quadrupled in 2015, compared with the previous year, and those involving violence have shot up six-fold, while arson attacks on refugee shelters have surpassed 200. Recently, the German press has anxiously reported on vigilante groups (*Bürgerwehr*) patrolling the streets of several cities.

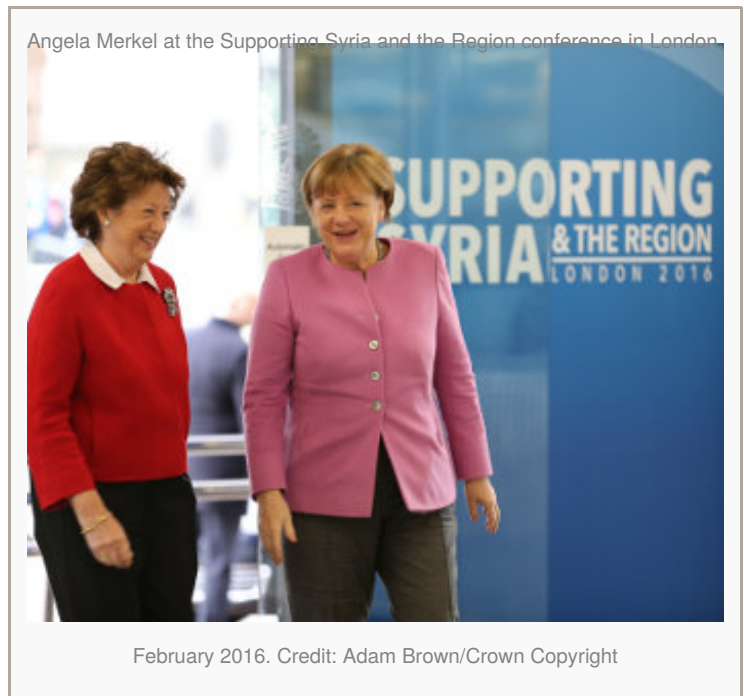
To many in Germany, such images evoke the racist violence of the early 1990s, when neo-Nazi skinheads terrorised (mostly formerly east) German cities and refugee shelters were torched in Rostock, Solingen, and Hoyerswerda. Then, as now, Germany faced unprecedented numbers of refugee arrivals (though today's dwarf those of the 1990s). Then, as now, German leaders responded with calls for stricter asylum laws and harsher enforcement.

The so-called asylum compromise of the 1990s aimed to drastically diminish refugee intake. Today, with the exception only of the left-wing Die Linke party, a consensus has emerged that the Cologne events signal the need for further asylum reforms, particularly to address 'foreigner criminality'. Likely steps range from reforms to Germany's sex crime law and less restrictive deportation rules, to changes in asylum laws and increased policing and surveillance, including arbitrary identity checks.

### **Reactive policies and the far-right**

Germany may well require a boost to its police force, and the arguments for reforming the country's obsolete sex crimes legislation – a move already on the table for months prior to the Cologne attacks – are uncontested. But the pattern of German public figures of almost all shades, who time and again unwittingly endorse the long-held positions of the most unabashedly xenophobic fringes of the far right, nevertheless remains deeply worrying.

Consider the question of sex crimes. In the aftermath of the Cologne attacks, critical voices have expressed scepticism about the supposedly sudden interest in gender violence on the German far right, which is generally viewed as committed to patriarchal values and traditional gender roles. Yet sexual abuse has long featured



prominently in far right discourse as an urgent problem criminally neglected by the state.

Far right rhetoric, to be sure, has often associated sexual abuse with the figure of the criminal foreigner, whether explicitly or implicitly. But this has not always been the case. Among the young right-wing extremists with whom I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, for example, several men organised a vigilante group and brutally tortured alleged child molesters based on rumours. None of their victims were foreigners or had an immigration background.

The issue of deportations offers another example. Irrespective of whether Germany's existing laws are sufficiently strict, the claim that the German justice system is unfairly lenient on criminal migrants is commonplace for right-wing extremist parties and movements. It was practically a truism for the young people with whom I worked, who attributed this putative leniency to the courts' hesitation to trigger deportations by disbursing harsher sentences.

In the 1990s, critics condemned the asylum compromise as official ratification of the claims – if not the acts – of the rioters and arsonists of Solingen and other cities. Today, once more, German leaders inadvertently confirm longstanding allegations of the xenophobic far right. Germany's sex crimes legislation, which leaves many victims of rape and harassment unprotected, no doubt requires a re-haul, and its deportation policy may or may not be in need of reform. But the timing, and the reasoning, could not be worse.

*Please read our comments policy before commenting.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1KRfy3l>

---

## About the author

**Nitzan Shoshan** – *El Colegio de México*

Nitzan Shoshan is a Professor at the Centro de Estudios Sociológicos in El Colegio de México.

- 

