

Cologne attacks: Merkel stays strong with refugees

The tensions following the sex attacks in Cologne may shake Merkel's government itself. They undermine Europe's most influential centrist government, to the detriment of the continent

By [Johannes Huber](#), Deputy Sport Editor (2014/15)

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A line of Syrian refugees crossing the border of Hungary and Austria on their way to Germany. Hungary, Central Europe, 6 September 2015. Image: Wikimedia

Instead of celebrating outside, I spent this past New Year's Eve firmly glued to a television screen. My home, which I had left before dawn only a day earlier, had become subject to a terrorist threat. Unlike past threats, this one was deemed serious enough to put the city in lockdown. The police forces rushed to the train stations, made the already present police look like mall cops. Equipped with full body armor and military grade automatic rifles, it was clear that Munich authorities were taking intelligence passed on by French intelligence very serious.

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I was certain that this would be the biggest news story in Germany from New Year's Eve. Yet in the past days, another of much bigger political significance has emerged. It appears that in Cologne, a group of about a thousand men, of North African and Arab decent, systematically circled and sexually assaulted women. Over 100 reports have been filed with police, ranging from theft, to sexual assault, to rape. Police in Hamburg state they received at least a dozen such complaints. They are scenes grimly echoing those

which occurred on the Tahir Square in 2011.

The political significance is tremendous. Germany has for over a year led Europe's effort to aid those in need of refuge. Unlike what some wish you to believe, the vast majority of Germans were in favor of this policy. As numbers grew and the absence of any strategy became apparent public opinion began to shift.



A banner from a "Refugee Welcome Centre" in Hamburg. Image: Rasande Tyskar

I find it truly admirable, that the chancellor stuck with her beliefs. For years she chose the politically safe route, sticking primarily to foreign policy issues, letting her cabinet deal with more divisive political issues. On the question of migration however, Angela Merkel decided to utilise all her political capital, to pursue a policy which she truly believes to be morally just. We are a republic after all, and what many on the right seem to not understand, is that in a republic those elected to lead do not bow to the will of the majority, for good reason. While the public may sometimes be in the right, not only is it difficult to actually assess the will of the public, few countries have had comparable problems with blind populism as Germany had.

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What Angela Merkel has then done with this policy, is stake everything on it. Not merely her own career, it has increasingly become a European project led by Germany and followed by more or less willing European nations. Germany has long been the moral compass of Europe, guiding the organization through tumultuous and divisive issues. Even during the Greek crisis, Germany sought and found allies. While the headlines always read “German demands”, they were as much Lithuanian and Estonian, Polish and French demands.

Germany was always heavily involved in the decision making process of anything European, but it did not coerce. The refugee crisis then has become as much a crossroads for Germany as it has become one for Europe. Cases such as those in Cologne and Hamburg strengthen the far right, but they also create very legitimate concerns for all. Why was not a single person arrested; where was the immediate police presence akin to Munich? Why did it take days for the government, police and media to even acknowledge the events in Cologne and Hamburg? As misguided as the far right may be, they are correct, that had this been a mob of neo-Nazis sexually assaulting migrant women, the immediate reaction would have been different.

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There is then an issue I wish to highlight. Horrific situations like those in Cologne strengthen opposition, but more importantly weaken the core, moderate base in Germany which fundamentally has little issue with immigration or refugees. Without a swift and competent response by German authorities, reasons will continue to accumulate for a strong anti-refugee policy. Should this occur, should Germany begin constructing walls, I believe the rest of Europe will follow without hesitation. Europe's core principle, the freedom of movement will effectively cease to exist.

Lastly, while these comparisons are used far too liberally, a far right shift in Germany would remove the last influential moderate centrist government in Europe. Most European governments have in the last five years either shifted far to the left or far to the right. Germany has remained a hope for centrists. As long as it remains this way, authoritarians in Hungary, or increasingly Spain, will remain influenced by liberalism. Should Germany too fall, Europe will fall with it.



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