

Best columns: Europe

Germany: A violent backlash against migrants



[A planned shelter burns in southern Germany.](#)

“Rage is in the air” in Germany, said **Melanie Amann** in *Der Spiegel* (Germany). Protests against the surging numbers of fleeing Syrians, Iraqis, and others seeking asylum here are becoming increasingly violent, with authorities recording more than 200 attacks on refugee homes nationwide this year. The backlash against migrants is felt most fiercely in the poorer former East Germany. When Chancellor Angela Merkel, herself from the east, recently visited a refugee shelter in the eastern town of Heidenau, hissing protesters called her a “race traitor.” But those angry protesters do not represent the majority of Germans. Even as thugs burn down and vandalize migrant homes, thousands of ordinary Germans are behaving “more generously than ever before,” donating clothing and toys, volunteering at shelters, and organizing soccer clubs for refugee children. President Joachim Gauck says these different responses represent the choice between “bright Germany” and “dark Germany.” Which will prevail?

What an unfair characterization, said **Jasper von Altenbockum** in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany). Is every opponent of unfettered immigration to be demonized as some kind of cruel-hearted monster? That is no way to fight prejudice against migrants—instead, such rhetoric will only “harden the opposition.” At least 800,000 migrants are expected to arrive in Germany this year, and even more next year. Some of them are genuine asylum seekers, but many others just want to exploit Germany’s generous welfare

system. What is needed from our leaders is not pious grandstanding but frank admission that we have a problem. We must make hard choices about who can stay and who must leave—or more Germans will heed the call of the far right.

Germany can't make those choices until it shakes off its post–World War II mindset, said **Thomas Isler** in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Switzerland). Authorities are still fearful that a far-right, neo-Nazi party could grab power, and so refuse to make space for any political discourse to the right of Merkel's conservative Christian Democrats. "Anyone who is dubious about the European Union, or opposed to the euro, or has doubts about immigration" is now immediately branded an extremist. Other countries have "domesticated the right wing" by allowing right-wing parties to participate in policy debates. For Germans, any talk against immigration is effectively taboo—and that means even reasonable people are pushed to the fringes.

Yet this xenophobia isn't really a German problem—it's an eastern German problem, said **Rüdiger Scheidges** in *Handelsblatt* (Germany). Only there "does a radical-right mob threaten migrants, politicians, and even police with appalling terroristic violence." Political leaders in the east were silent for months as protests grew, and remained so even after the attacks began. They alone are to blame for the "new dividing line that has cut Germany" into two parts: one where desperate refugees are welcomed and one where they are abused.

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