

Germany sees political controversy over rescuing refugees from Greece

Interior Minister Horst Seehofer has blocked individual German states from rescuing migrants from Greek refugee camps. The state governments are up in arms and are considering legal action.



Several of Germany's 16 states are considering banding together to defy the federal government's plan to block them from bringing in refugees from the chronically overcrowded camps in Greece.

Angela Merkel's administration has blocked two German states — Berlin and Thuringia — from unilaterally flying a few hundred refugees out of the hopelessly overcrowded camps on the Greek islands.

The two states are considering challenging the block in court, but given the humanitarian conditions at the Moria camp on Lesbos, they are also seeking political options to accelerate the process.

Read more: From Greece to Germany — How do you give refugee children a new home?

Other states, including the most populous, North Rhine-Westphalia, have also said they would be prepared to take in refugees from the camps.

Berlin's Interior Minister Andreas Geisel this week called for a conference where state interior ministers can speak to Federal Interior Minister Horst Seehofer to resolve the issue. "We cannot simply shrug our shoulders and accept a 'No' from Horst Seehofer to our readiness to help people in desperate circumstances," he said.



CDU politician Armin Laschet visited the Moria refugee camp in August 2020

Crisis unfolding

The humanitarian disaster unfolding at the Moria camp is all too clear — even to leading members of Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU). One of them, North Rhine-Westphalia's State Premier Armin Laschet even visited Moria last week. He had to abruptly cut short his visit for security reasons after crowds

of refugees had gathered, reportedly under the impression he was Germany's chancellor.

Read more: Coronavirus crisis hampering Mediterranean migrant rescues

But before his visit ended, Laschet — who does indeed have ambitions to take over from Merkel as chancellor — acknowledged that he was witnessing a “cry of the desperate.”

The Moria camp is designed for just under 3,000 refugees, but according to the latest information, between 14,000 and 17,000 people live there and in unofficial camps around it. Violence between members of different nationalities and disputes with the local population have become recurrent.



Interior Minister Horst Seehofer wants a unified EU-wide approach to migration

An EU solution, or a local one?

Laschet's state, North Rhine-Westphalia, has offered to accept several hundred particularly vulnerable people from the Greek camps, but only as part of a program coordinated by the federal government together with other EU

countries.

Meanwhile, Berlin's and Thuringia's offers to take in refugees unilaterally has only got them into a row with Seehofer, who once called immigration the "mother of all problems."

The fierceness of the dispute could have something to do with party politics: Both Berlin and Thuringia are governed by left-wing coalitions, Berlin's one is led by the Social Democrats, while Thuringia's is led by the socialist Left Party.

Seehofer says the federal government has final say, and anyway, any solution to the refugee crisis has to be worked out by the European Union. "No country in the world can manage migration alone," said Seehofer. "This makes it all the more important that we finally make visible progress in European asylum policy. We are on the right track, and I am not prepared to jeopardize that now."

Key refugee routes to Europe

Number of illegal border crossings into the EU

■ Schengen countries

Eastern land route

2015: **1,920**

2019: **600**

Western Balkan

2015: **764,038**

2019: **14,200**

Western Mediterranean

2015: **7,164**

2019: **23,700**

West Africa

2015: **874**

2019: **2,000**

Central Mediterranean

2015: **153,946**

2019: **13,800**

Eastern Mediterranean

2015: **885,386**

2019: **82,600**



Source: Frontex | Arrows are indicators and do not show exact routes

Mediterranean countries bore the brunt of the refugee crisis

States' rights

Ulrich Karpenstein, a lawyer at the Redeker, Sellner, and Dahs law firm who drew up an assessment of whether the Federal Interior Ministry can refuse consent to the humanitarian programs of the states, does not agree with Seehofer.

“You could just as easily say we need a UN solution, and as long as there’s no UN solution you can’t get people out of a humanitarian emergency,” he told DW. “It’s a purely political argument, but not a legal one.”

On the basis of those humanitarian programs, a private organization Karpenstein co-founded, named “Flüchtlingspaten Syrien,” has been involved in bringing people out of desperate humanitarian circumstances in Syria.

“According to German law, the state government can give certain groups of foreign nationals a residency permit if they are in an emergency humanitarian situation,” he told DW.



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Germany this year received unaccompanied children from overcrowded refugee camps

The approval of the Federal Interior Ministry is necessary, but, he argues, the federal government cannot overrule the states if it believes that these people need help. “And that is not in dispute in the case of Moria — even the federal government has said it wants to help these people,” said Karpenstein.

The state governments want to select refugees based on lists drawn up by organizations on the ground like the UNHCR or Doctors Without Borders.

Unequal treatment

In fact, Seehofer has approved earlier requests for people in need. There were, for example, programs to bring Yazidi people from Iraq as well additional contingents of Syrians. The difference is that those people did not come via another EU country, but directly from their home countries, usually in cooperation with the UNHCR.

The EU has been at an impasse on this issue for years. The Mediterranean countries where the refugees arrive, such as Italy, Greece, and Malta, want a fixed migrant distribution system among all EU countries.

But other member states, especially in the eastern part of the EU, are flatly opposed to this “in any form,” as seven countries emphasized in a letter to the EU Commission in July. Seehofer believes that any compromise with them, no matter how small, is only possible if there is calm, in other words: if there are no new admission initiatives from German states.

Seehofer is also facing strong opposition from left-wing parties and from the churches. But from a purely legal point of view, Seehofer has the power to enforce a uniformity of German refugee policy.

Source:

<https://www.dw.com/en/germany-greece-refugees-asylum-controversy/a-54538520>

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