

Merkel Defiant: No Regrets About Refugee Crisis

With re-election a month away, German chancellor says she'd do it all 'the same way again' while urging other EU countries to step up.

Despite the massive problems that allowing hundreds of thousands of refugees into her country over the past two years have caused her, German Chancellor Angela Merkel told the *Welt am Sonntag* newspaper Sunday that she would do it "the same way again" if given the chance.

Merkel, who is up for re-election for a fourth term on Sept. 24, said during the interview that she stands by the decision she made in 2015 to open Germany's borders and usher in hundreds of thousands of refugees. Although her political standing took a significant beating as a result of her "open door" immigration policy, Merkel said she'd wouldn't change anything because she didn't make any significant mistakes.

"I'd make all the important decisions of 2015 the same way again," Merkel said. "It was an extraordinary situation, and I made my decision based on what I thought was right from a political and humanitarian standpoint."

"Those kinds of extraordinary situations happen every once in a while in a country's history," she added. "The head of government has to act, and I did."

But Merkel went beyond a mere defense of her own country's actions as she called upon other European countries to step up to the plate and take in refugees. Noting that Greece and Italy have borne the brunt of the refugee crisis "simply because of their geography," Merkel said she would not rest until other European Union countries accepted more refugees.

"That some countries refuse to accept any refugees ... contradicts the spirit of Europe," she said. "We'll overcome that. It will take time and patience, but we will succeed."

Although Merkel applauded herself for holding fast to her "humanitarian standpoint" in dealing with the refugee crisis, her "open door" policy has taken a

serious toll on her political standing since 2015. Merkel's troubles came to a head on New Year's Eve in 2015, when more than 2,000 men across several German cities sexually assaulted more than 1,200 women. Of the 120 suspects identified, most of them were migrants, and many had taken advantage of Merkel's immigration policies.

Merkel's policies led many of her critics to accuse her of prioritizing humanitarian concerns over the national security and well-being of her own citizens. In addition, statistics released by Germany's federal police in late April 2017 indicated that migrant crime increased by approximately 50 percent during 2016. Although Germany's migrants accounted for only 2 percent of the general population, they represented more than 8 percent of all criminal suspects in 2016.

While Merkel's popularity plummeted in 2015 and into 2016, her political standing began to rise when the influx of immigrants slowed to 280,000 in 2016 and decreased even further to 106,000 during the first several months of 2017. Now, with just a few weeks left before the Sept. 24 election, an Emnid opinion poll found that Merkel's conservative party would clinch 38 percent of the vote, up from 32 percent back in February, and approximately 15 percentage points ahead of the Social Democrats (SPD) party. In 2013, Merkel's party won 41.5 percent of the vote.

But dissatisfaction with Merkel's policies still remains, and her immigration stance contributed to the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, which pollsters predict could take 10 percent of the vote on Sept. 24.

Merkel's fighting words on Sunday contrasted sharply with the statements she made a year ago, in Sept. 2016, after her party's disastrous results in the Berlin state election. While Merkel was unapologetic on Sunday, she issued an apology for some of the consequences her "open door" policies brought upon an ill-prepared Germany.

"If I was able to, I would turn back time by many, many years, so that I could have prepared the whole government and the authorities for the situation which hit us out of the blue in the late summer of 2015," Merkel said in a speech in Sept. 2016, though she still stood by her policies.

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