

Statement on New Year gang assaults

Letter from Cologne

The "Letter from Cologne" is a text by well-known citizens of the town. Its signatories are Navid Kermani, Cardinal Rainer Woelki, Werner Spinner, Wolfgang Niedecken, Stefan Bachmann, Fatih Cevikkollu and Christiane Woopen, amongst others. The local newspapers Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger, Kölnische Rundschau, Generalanzeiger Bonn and Rheinische Post are also participating in the campaign.

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We love Cologne. We love the diversity of our city, the zest for life that is always a bit chaotic, not particularly regulated and never domesticated. We love the hospitality and openness to cultures, languages, and ways of life which may seem odd at first but quickly become a part of everyday life. We love our city's ability to make enthusiastic Cologners out of immigrants within a very short period of time. At the same time, we sense that Cologne is an ancient city located on a great river that flows past us in the same way every day, and this perhaps gives us the composure to not immediately fear a disaster each time we hear bad news, and even when our football club is relegated, to still think about qualifying for the next Champions League. "It has always worked out fine", is in fact our attitude to life.

Our burning local patriotism may perhaps seem strange, for viewed from the outside – and inwardly we'll admit it – the formerly magnificent Cologne is not beautiful due to the destruction in the years between 1942 and 1945. Truly, it's not. But the ugliness that the war and unfortunately also our own negligence have left behind in our streets and plazas, or a disaster such as the collapse of the Historical Archives, which all but shattered our forbearance, have not diminished our love. On the contrary, the apparent vulnerability and imperfection of our city has only served to deepen our love even more. And we realise it's up to us to make sure our Cologne will continue to thrive.

The events on the night of New Year's Eve in and around Cologne's central train station have agitated, alarmed, and unsettled us all. Hundreds of women and girls have become the victims of sexual violence and brutal, apparently organised crime. The authorities responsible for our safety not only helplessly watched on, but initially played down or even attempted to cover up this huge crime in the heart of our city. The fears, mutual accusations, unanswered questions, and some lurid media reports that have dominated the discussions and debates in our city since the night of New Year's Eve are threatening to divide our society. This is all the more true since we live in a time where cultural and ethnic conflicts are also leading more and more frequently to physical violence.

Jihadist terrorism, which indiscriminately kills innocent people around the world, has now set its sights on Germany. German right-wing extremists have staged almost a thousand attacks on refugee shelters in the past year alone. Just a day before Henriette Reker was elected mayor of Cologne, she was stabbed down suffering life threatening injuries, due to her stance over the refugee issue. And just a few days ago, we were forced to watch how supporters of the so-called anti-Islamic "Pegida Movement" ran riot at Cologne station and how shortly afterwards, unknown persons hunted down people of foreign descent in the city centre. The countless

helpers and politicians who have been championing the reception of refugees over the past months are being proclaimed naive idiots, if not traitors to their country. On the other hand, the citizens who have articulated their concerns about the immigration feel they have generally been discredited as xenophobes.

To counteract the growing polarisation in our society, it is important to remember social solidarity – and namely with the incidents of New Year's Eve firmly in mind. Because regardless of our gender, age, origin, and religion, no matter which profession and political party we belong to, or what our sexual orientation and private passions may be, we all want to move safely and freely in Cologne with an open mind. We have thus written down four requirements, which we believe are not just our own. And we have added comments to each one that will probably provoke opposition with some – but this is also good as long as it is constructive and non-offensive in tone. From our point of view, it is imperative that this debate, which we have been holding for good reason in and beyond Cologne since the night of New Year's Eve, is objective.

1. Zero tolerance of sexual violence.

Sexual violence exists in most, if not all, societies and cultures. At the central train station on the night of New Year's Eve, it was obviously carried out by young men of North African and Arabic descent. Even if alcohol, drugs, and cataclysmic group dynamics may have played a part, it would be blind to disregard the fact that this violence is based on an oppressive image of women. Even before New Year's Eve we knew that some men in some milieus have a profound problem with equality. We have frequently come across this machismo in the milieus of people from Arabic or Middle Eastern descent, too. We can and must say this if we want to ensure that the dignity of a woman is inviolable at all times and all places in our city. Because only when we can identify the social and cultural causes of violence can we also overcome them.

Violence does not just begin with physical assaults; it can already consist of obscene, humiliating, or aggressive words. We will not accept violence in any form and are determined to intervene sooner whenever women are being harassed. And we hope that the incidents of New Year's Eve raises our awareness of sexual violence – an issue concerning society as a whole. According to women's rights organisations such as "Terre des Femmes" every three minutes a woman is raped in Germany, three-fourths of them within their own family or circle of acquaintances. We should not put up with that and need to turn against sexual violence, no matter who commits it.

2. Fight against gang crime

Many of us have observed or even experienced for themselves that alongside other criminal organisations, there has been organised street crime for some years in Cologne, which is mainly perpetrated by Moroccans and Algerians. It is enough to talk with our friendly neighbours from Morocco or Algeria to assume that these young men, who all tend to be single – and who did not come to Germany with the current wave of refugees, by the way – were already criminals and drug addicts in their home countries. And we ask ourselves, why do our North African neighbours appear to know these young people, have long complained about their ruthlessness, yet the police apparently have not reacted to them.

As said, we are not investigators and we have no evidence, but for those of us that live in Cologne, it is obvious that precisely these drugged-up criminals and gangs were at the centre of the events that took place on the night of New Year's Eve, and they are also the ones that

threaten women and young people in particular on a daily basis, be it around the central train station or Friday evenings on the Cologne Ring. We expect the authorities to take more decisive action against the street criminals, punish them and even possibly expel them. It is in the interests of people from all cultures that crime does not enjoy any cultural advantages.

3. Clarification of the governmental failure

The behaviour of the various enforcement forces on the night of New Year's Eve and especially the opinions of the official and political leaders in the days that followed has left us stunned. Safety authorities cannot protect us against every terrorist attack, but what happened at the central train station could have been prevented. The operational command grotesquely misjudged the situation for whatever reasons and even rejected the reinforcement offered. It falsely informed the general public about the events and later tried to defend itself with absurd arguments – should criminals caught in the act for instance, not be led away because there are supposedly no cells free in Cologne? The authorities initially concealed the origins of the culprits, hoodwinking their own mayor into the bargain, only to pass on evidence and operational reports, which also refer to these origins, piece by piece to the tabloid press. This bespeaks incompetence if not malicious intent.

If it had been the authorities' intention – which we do not believe – to confirm prejudices, stoke the fear of refugees, and undermine confidence in the state, then they could hardly have behaved any differently than how they did on the night of New Year's Eve and in the days that followed. This criticism is expressly not directed at the individual police officers who ensure our safety at high personal risk. We continue to trust them. But the official and political leaders responsible for this misconduct must be identified and called to account, whether they are above or below the resigned President of Police in the hierarchy.

Within just a few years, the safety authorities have failed four disastrous times in Cologne alone: following the two NSU attacks, when victims were branded as culprits for years against better knowledge, 2014 during the right-wing extremist "Hogesa" riots, when our city centre also became a legal vacuum for hours, and now on the night of New Year's Eve. This leads us to conclude that the safety authorities have structural problems which need to be urgently addressed. Because in view of the increasing violence of jihadist or racist groups, we are more dependent than ever before on an efficient security apparatus, well-equipped police officers, and a strong state in order to ensure that our democracy works.

4. Stop the xenophobic smear campaigns – Germany remains a hospitable country

The events on the night of New Year's Eve have unfortunately also led to a brutalisation of the public debate. The main sufferers are people of foreign descent, who are not only being put under blanket suspicion, but are also being verbally or violently attacked on an alarmingly frequent basis. Because many young Arabs committed brutally invasive acts against women on the night of New Year's Eve, the Internet, public service broadcasting, and newspapers are all claiming that Arab or Muslim men are basically prone to sexual violence. This is more than just a simplification; it is wrong. Must we point out that the most recent mass rapes that took place on European soil were committed not so long ago by Christians against Muslim women, namely in the Bosnian war, without anyone capable of blaming Christian culture altogether? No, it should be enough to remember the long and painful struggle of women for equal rights and physical integrity in Germany, too.

Not only individual people, but also societies and cultures are able to learn and change. We are aware that some refugees bring with them an image of women that contradicts our idea of equality. So, we should make more of an effort to convey our values, which the German Basic Law so wonderfully and precisely summarises, alongside the German language. This requires much more effort than before. But when we look at the cultural and material wealth that immigration has bestowed upon us in Cologne for more than two thousand years, we recognize that integration is a worthwhile and realistic goal.

In the German Basic Law, which undisputedly forms the framework of life together in our society, the right to asylum is one of the central fundamental rights. We are proud that the vast majority of Germans gave the refugees a warm welcome in the autumn. We are also touched by the gratitude most of the refugees have expressed for this hospitality. We also recognize that on the whole, the authorities have coped brilliantly with the challenge of providing for more than a million new people within just a few months. And yes, we continue to believe that the Federal Republic of Germany – as with its previous historical tasks – can also grow through this challenge.

However, we agree that uncontrolled immigration on such a scale as we have observed since the autumn is unsustainable. But we believe the simplistic proposed solutions such as an abstract maximum limit or the closure of the German/Austrian border to be out of touch with reality. A humane, fair, and long-term refugee policy can only be established within the context of Europe. Therefore, our concern today has less to do with Germany than Europe, which risks losing its soul through the resurgence of nationalism.

(Isabel Schayani)