



BERLIN IN THE HANDS OF FARMERS

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The government district trembles under the huge tractor wheels. Endless columns of trekkers and articulated lorries make their way to the centre of Berlin in a star shape and fill the streets with their honking. A parallel world is confronted with the reality of rural life.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2rBBCKsgqE&t=493s>

The situation is confusing. One of the demonstrators has a lifting platform and is kind enough to give us a ride to lofty heights. From there it becomes clear: Berlin is in the hands of farmers on this day. At least in the centre of Berlin.

Several thousand tractors blockade the German capital on 15 January 2024. Farmers have been repeatedly paralysing the country for several weeks to demonstrate against the German government's austerity measures. The farmers feel that their livelihoods are threatened by two of the German government's plans in particular: The abolition of agricultural diesel and the taxation of agricultural and forestry vehicles. The latter has already been cancelled due to the protests and is therefore off the table. However, farmers are not prepared to give up the subsidisation of agricultural diesel either.

Until now, farmers were reimbursed 21 cents by the state for every litre of diesel they filled up with. That is now set to end. Farmers now fear that they will have to close their businesses and that regional food will be replaced by imported products in supermarkets. Many of them have felt victimised by politicians for years, particularly due to the massive burden of agricultural bureaucracy. Finance Minister Christian Lindner is also present that day, but is not greeted particularly enthusiastically.

The stream of newly arriving tractors just won't stop. It doesn't take long before the Street of June 17th resembles an agricultural fair. The thousands of demonstrators - the exact number of participants is still being disputed - move between the huge bikes towards the Brandenburg Gate. There, the protest is concentrated around the stage of the farmers' association.

At the same time, the German parliament is cordoned off by police vehicles. Even the so-called armoured special vehicle was deployed as a precaution. It is doubtful whether this could have held its own against tractors. Obviously, the parliament was afraid of the fruits of its own agricultural policy.

There is distance not only between the parliament and the farmers, but also between some farmers and reporters. The media propaganda and defamation has left its mark and a deep mistrust. Only a few farmers are prepared to speak to us on camera.

"Can you briefly introduce yourself? What is your name is, where do you come from and what kind of company do you work for?"

"Yes, I'm Martin Schmidt and I'm from Thuringia, near Jena. We had to travel 300 kilometres by tractor. We have a farm at home with around 300 hectares of arable land and grassland. We keep suckler cows and ewes and have now travelled to Berlin to see what the atmosphere is like up here."

"What measures are you primarily demonstrating against here?"

"It was actually against the motor vehicle tax and against the agricultural diesel subsidy. The car tax is now off the table. That means it's no longer coming. Now it's all about keeping the subsidisation of agricultural diesel and reducing all the bureaucracy in agriculture. We now spend 4 to 5 hours a day just sitting in the office, filling out applications. Even a farm like ours now has to employ an office worker to do all this on the side."

"If the subsidisation of agricultural diesel is abolished, what does that mean for you in concrete terms in your everyday life?"

"Well, let me be very specific: we have 5 tractors at home, we also have 35,000 litres of diesel that we blow every year, you really have to say that. If we no longer get the 21 cents, that means we can definitely sell 2 tractors and have to rethink a lot."

"Do you see this development primarily in relation to the last two years of the coalition government under Olaf Scholz or has it been going on for longer?"

"It's actually been going on for much longer. The protests should have come much earlier. The current government has played its part. But the whole build-up of bureaucracy actually started 10 to 15 years ago. It hasn't just happened in the last two years."

"Is there any political force that you can place your hopes in, because the CDU was obviously also involved in the years before that? Is there a relevant alternative?"

"Well, let me put it this way, normally no party here is an alternative. They're all in the same boat. They need to rethink. I have no problem with a green government being in power, but they need to rethink. They need to promote domestic agriculture and not work against it and impose everything. That doesn't work."

Michael Hellermann will also be demonstrating in Berlin on 15 January. He comes from North Rhine-Westphalia, more precisely from the Sauerland region, as he emphasises. He is a farmer and works part-time for the farmers' association, where he looks after young farmers.

"The rally and the demonstration are now largely over here. What happens now?"

"We'll stay here for another hour or so. Then we'll make our way home again. We travelled about 6 or 7 hours this morning."

"How did you perceive the atmosphere today? Was it aggressive or did everything remain largely peaceful?"

"Well, what I heard today wasn't aggressive at all. However, the opinion was clearly expressed that people don't think much of Mr Lindner, for example. You could tell that. He was pretty much booed today. Apart from that, I have to say that everything else was quite well received and perceived. Yes, the minister came off badly."

"One of the major points of criticism, apart from the agricultural diesel, is the huge burden of bureaucratisation that farmers have to suffer. Can you tell us something from your everyday life?"

"Yes, of course we farm in the open countryside. That means we have fertiliser requirements. We have to register all our animals. We have to apply for building permits, which is almost as much work as a petrol station. We have to apply for agricultural diesel again, if we still have to apply for it. My father spends more time in the office than in the field. I think we have made our voices heard here today, but I don't yet know whether it will really reach the federal government as we would like it to. I hope so. However, I also have to say that if those who shout the loudest always get their way in a democracy, then that is also difficult. It's a double-edged sword. I hope we can achieve something, perhaps that this agricultural diesel rebate will be extended over several years. That would already be a success."

Some of the farmers return home on this day. Duty on the farms calls. Many farmers, however, remain on the Street of June 17th with their machines. The next few weeks will show how long their breath will last. The farmers' protests are far from over with this preliminary climax in Berlin.
