

Crisis PR – Cologne’s Top Cop Caught in Scandal Backlash

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While domestic politics continue to revolve around the all but endless presidential race, international PR has been riveted to particularly horrible allegations coming out of the German city of Cologne. According to various German and international media reports, a “small group of Arab or North African men” brutally attacked and sexually threatened women on New Year’s Eve.

When news that the assaults went unmentioned in early police reports on January 1, people were outraged. Cologne’s police chief, Wolfgang Albers initially made matters worse by misjudging the outcry, and largely dismissing the accusation that local officers were slow to respond to the need to protect the women.



(Source: Twitter)

German media reported a police description of events: women having to run, terrified, through “mobs” of drunken men just

outside one of Cologne's main train stations. Afterward, even Cologne's mayor, Henriette Reker, piled on, saying police withheld information from her, stating, "...trust in the Cologne police leadership is significantly shaken..."

Now, in the aftermath of the event, Albers, has been forced into early retirement. While it's impossible to lay these crimes at his feet, he was "in charge" when they happened, and a raging international public wants blood. According to the Associated Press, the state's interior minister, Ralf Jaeger, said the move was "necessary to restore public trust and the Cologne police's ability to act, with a view to upcoming major events."

The lesson here? Primarily, that you are only as good – and just as responsible – as the members of your team. It's very likely Albers' attitude about events was created entirely by reports he received from his officers. After all, the chief was likely nowhere near this event. He had to build his understanding of the situation entirely from the reports and responses of his team, who, obviously, did not handle the scenario well at any level.

Secondarily, message control is vital. Early on in this scandal, many media outlets reported sexual assaults as part of events. Now, a week later, it's come out that no sexual assaults occurred in this situation. Too late now. When local police failed to quickly and deftly gain control of the narrative, they lost it for good. Now, from a PR perspective, it doesn't matter what actually happened. The die is cast, and too many people already "know". Remember, if you are too slow to act when a narrative begins, it's often as if you did not act at all.