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Violent German teen sent to cope in Siberia

- Boy, 16, has to make own fire, dig toilet, pump water
- Critics attack nine-month bleak exile from family

Kate Connolly in Berlin
The Guardian, Friday 18 January 2008

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German authorities exasperated at the antisocial behaviour of a 16-year-old boy have sent him to a remote Siberian village for an "intensive educational experience", it emerged yesterday. The unusual measure by youth welfare officers in the central state of Hesse raised fresh questions about how to deal with delinquents who have been blamed for a series of ugly crimes.

The boy, who has not been identified, was dispatched east after behaving violently in school and at home and attacking his mother. He is being forced to fend for himself in boot camp-style conditions in the forlorn village of Sedelnikovo, several hours drive from the city of Omsk, in the western Siberian interior.

He has had to cope by collecting and chopping firewood to make his own fires, digging his own toilet and pumping water supplies from a well. He will stay there for nine months, separated from family and friends, the internet and television, under a programme designed specifically for him.

Under the supervision of a Russian-speaking German assistant, the boy is also attending school. Once he returns to Germany, he will be monitored for a further two years.

"We deliberately sought a region that was particularly lacking in allure," said Stefan Becker, the head of the youth and social department in Giessen, calling it "the ultima

ratio" in the attempt to re-educate the boy, for whom all other measures had failed. "[The youth] spends most of his time trying to cope with his day to day existence, living in conditions like we had 30 or 40 years ago," he added. "If he doesn't chop the wood, his room is cold. If he doesn't fetch water, he can't wash."

The Hesse authorities have defended the move as an "educational adventure" and say an inspector who visited the boy believed the "treatment" was working. Hundreds of other youths have been sent on similar programmes to countries as diverse as Greece and Kyrgyzstan.

The details have emerged in the midst of one of the most heated state election campaigns that Germany has known for years, in which youth crime has featured prominently. The Christian Democratic state president of Hesse, Roland Koch, has called for boot camps and "warning-shot" arrests to be applied to young criminals, and his election speeches have particularly focused on clamping down on immigrants, said to be responsible for half of all crimes committed by the under-21s.

The chancellor, Angela Merkel, has backed Koch's campaign, saying that the discussion was long overdue. Koch's stance on crime and immigration has won national resonance and the Hesse vote on January 27 - as well as one in the state of Lower Saxony on the same day - is an early test for Merkel ahead of next year's federal election.

But the decision to send the teenager to Siberia is a step too far for some, particularly as equally bleak, though not as cold, regions are to be found in Germany. One commentator called it "more akin to a reality TV show than a social welfare programme".

Some have described it as a cost-cutting measure, which, at €150 a day (£111), is about a third of the price of a similar scheme in Germany.

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