

European Union expands eastward and reinforces its borders

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During the years following the collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1989, Poland's eastern border became less and less secure. Relatives, separated for decades, were once again able to meet up with each other. Refugees from civil wars all over the world also used this border to enter Europe. In line with the latest dictates of the European Union (EU), an "iron curtain" is again to be raised in this zone as part of Poland's entry into the European community.

Poland's approximately 1,150 kilometre-long border with Lithuania, White Russia and the Ukraine currently constitutes a serious "security risk" for the EU. Doubts are being expressed with increasing frankness within the EU as to whether EU candidate Poland will be able to seal off its border effectively. Consequently Germany's Interior Minister Otto Schily (SPD-Social Democratic Party) is now demanding the deployment of an international border patrol to ensure the "safeguarding of the extended European Union".

For Schily the chief task of such a patrol will be "safeguarding against refugees and unwanted immigration", which has been so effectively implemented since the coming into force of the EU-Schengen Accord. In line with this agreement, all other new member states are strictly obliged to enforce the border regulations.

The Schengen Accord dictated harsher visa requirements for people coming from countries outside those surrounding the EU, as well as a tightening up of land, sea and airport border controls. With the aid of the Schengen Information System (SIS), persons throughout Europe designated as suspect can be arrested if they attempt to cross a border into the EU countries. Although it is true that internal border controls between EU member states were by and large abolished, they can be re-established whenever they are

again deemed necessary.

The borders of the European Union have been turned into a virtual bulwark against refugees, who now find it impossible to gain legal entry. Since this has taken place, hundreds have died desperately trying to reach an EU country with the help of criminal bands of smugglers.

Under pressure from Brussels, the Polish border police have meanwhile intensified controls on the eastern border. Border officials have been equipped with machine-guns. Regular raids on bars and hotels near the border to track down illegal refugees and cigarette or alcohol smugglers have become the order of the day.

Just how important the EU considers the reinforcement of its future eastern border is illustrated by the fact that last year it spent 50 million euros on special-purpose vehicles, nocturnal surveillance equipment, uniforms and German advisers. For a long time now, officers of the Polish border patrol have been trained in Germany and EU inspectors travel regularly to Poland to evaluate their progress.

The result has been a substantial decline in border trade involving small traders from White Russia and the Ukraine. In many border towns in eastern Poland after 1989, markets and bazaars appeared where Ukraine or White Russian traders offered their wares. Often they were women selling cheap clothing, curtains or vodka in order to supplement their meagre earnings. But they also used their visits to Poland to buy things for themselves and to get hold of goods needed for daily life but not available in their own countries then, and still lacking today. This kind of "border economy" was not frowned upon by the Polish government because it helped to alleviate to some extent the serious economic problems of the border region. Today most of

the numerous traders cross over the border several times each day, carrying with them only as many goods as they can fit into their coat pockets.

In spite of all the tightening up, it is unclear—from the point of view of the EU—whether the eastern border will really be secure in the future. So after Poland's entry into the EU there will be good reason for retaining controls—for example, on the Polish-German border. But it is not only in this respect that Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary will be second-class members of the European community.

Should the EU's eastward expansion get under way as early as 2004, there will be no immediate freedom of movement into the Union's labour market for workers from the new member countries. What is customary for current EU member states—namely, that the working population is able to look for work and reside in any chosen EU country—will not initially be possible for the peoples of the new member states. According to Günter Verheugen, the German EU commissioner for eastward expansion, the period of transition will take at least five years, and if necessary a further two. This view is completely in line with the wishes of the German and Austrian governments.

The extremely tense social conditions, high unemployment rate and lack of perspective, above all for young people in Poland, would doubtless lead to a wave of immigration into adjacent EU countries. Thus, loud warnings about a “flood of cheap labour from the east” are being made by the SPD-Green Party coalition government in Berlin and echoed by the German media.

This campaign is in no way motivated by concern about maintaining wage levels and social standards in Germany. The government of Gerhard Schröder (SPD) has itself recently trumpeted the attack on the unemployed. Its aim is to introduce low-wage work on a broad scale and force the unemployed to accept any kind of job, or otherwise suffer severe cuts to their unemployment benefits.

On one hand, the warnings about the “cheap labour Poles” serve to distract attention from this policy and make eastern European workers scapegoats for the further deterioration of social conditions. On the other, politicians and the business community are afraid that a wave of uncontrolled immigration from eastern Europe could lead to the social destabilisation of further layers

of society. Any importation of Poland's social problems to Germany is to be averted at all costs.

German standards of social welfare that have reconciled social classes for decades are to be abolished. The SPD-Green government attaches great importance to doing this as unobtrusively as possible, and steering clear of further social upheaval. And as far as the people of Poland are concerned, EU entry will not mean more freedom and open borders. On the contrary, EU plans will result in the country being more tightly insulated within its borders both to the east and west.



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