European Union plan to restrict immigration

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The stringent control and limitation of immigration into the European Union (EU) is set to be the major theme at the upcoming EU summit in Seville, Spain on June 21-22. Both Germany's Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD—Social Democratic Party) and France's President Jacques Chirac (Gaullist) decided to push for such a policy when they met in Paris at the end of last month.

In doing so, they are in full accord with a similar recommendation from the incumbent president of the European Council, Spain's Prime Minister José Maria Aznar (People's Party), as well as with Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair (Labour Party) and almost all the other heads of government in the EU states.

Chirac declared that entry points into EU countries would have to be much more strictly controlled and demanded consistent procedures to combat people smugglers. Schröder expressed "total agreement" with Chirac and added that the issue of immigration should "not be left to the extreme right". He hoped that this "degree of awareness of reality" would also be observed within the European Commission.

Schröder and Chirac met shortly after the success of the extreme right-wing National Front in the first round of the French presidential elections. This occurred directly after the parliamentary elections in the Netherlands in mid-May, when the recently formed right-wing populist party, Liste Pim Fortuyn, won 26 seats in its first showing. The political forces grouping themselves around Fortuyn—who has since been murdered—had also entered the election campaign with crude anti-Islamic propaganda and demands for restrictions on immigration. The organisation is now part of the Dutch government.

Even before Schröder and Chirac's meeting, it was apparent that the European Commission would comply with the calls for harsher laws and measures against refugees and foreigners from non-EU states.

In a closed meeting on June 2, the EU Commission for Domestic and Judicial Affairs ruled to reduce the opportunities for children of foreigners, legally resident in an EU country, to be reunited with their families. With this new ruling, the EU Commission is bowing to pressure from state and government leaders of the EU member countries—in particular, to years of pressure from German Interior Minister Otto Schily (SPD).

A proposal submitted in December 1999 by Portuguese EU Commissioner for Domestic and Judicial Affairs Antonio Vitorino recommended that all underage children be granted the right to reunite with their families in EU countries. This was to apply not only to the children's parents, but also to their other relatives in ascending order of blood relation, e.g., uncles, aunts and grandparents. In contrast to the extremely restrictive EU immigration regulations, this would have alleviated the situation of such children. For two-and-a-half years, the corresponding draft law was blocked by representatives of the social democratic-Green government, who exercised their veto in every vote.

The new submission of May 2 this year still stipulates that underage children have a right to reunion with their families, but with the following qualification: "a member state may diverge from this provision by examining whether a child over 12 years of age fulfilled the proposed criteria for integration, at the time of the incorporation of this guideline into the domestic legal regulations of the state concerned."

This means that the scrutiny of individual children over 12 years of age, already mandatory under German immigration law, will have the blessing of the EU Commission and consequently will possibly apply as a precedent for correspondingly harsher procedures in other member states. This guideline can become effective throughout the EU as soon as the German immigration law—which caused such a stir in the upper

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house of parliament at the end of March—is signed by German President Johannes Rau (SPD) and comes into force at the beginning of next year.

Although there is to be a reduction in the age of children seeking reunion with their parents, the European Commission's new proposal no longer envisages a right of reunion with other relatives, in line with the principle of ascending level of relatedness. The right to family reunion has been reduced to relatives of the first level (parents, children) and will be granted only at the discretion of authorities within EU member countries. Thus it can be limited and even denied by means of national regulations.

It is also left to the arbitrary discretion of the national governments as to whether unmarried partners and their children can be reunited. Vitorino's original submission had proposed this as a legal right, if it was the practice of the member state concerned to "treat unmarried and married couples as equals".

At the end of last month, EU ministers in Rome met to discuss and prepare the establishment of a joint frontier police for the EU's external borders. After this meeting, Germany's Interior Minister Otto Schily declared: "There is broad agreement that cooperation on the issue of border policing should be intensified." He is expecting concrete decisions from the EU summit in Seville on June 21-22. He assumes that, in "a relatively short time", it will also be possible to establish intervention forces for deployment in areas of crisis.

Schily justified these measures by claiming it was necessary to reassert "the ability to react and control". At a press conference he stressed: "We want to be able to control the people who come into our countries" and that people constituting a security risk must be prevented from gaining entry into the EU. Like Schröder, Schily expressed the fear that extreme right-wing groups in the EU would win ground if the problem were not addressed.

Of course, representatives of the European countries are closing their eyes to the fact that the problem of illegal immigration is primarily caused by the extremely restrictive immigration laws in the EU countries. Furthermore, in recent years the right to asylum has been undermined to the point where it is barely visible. This has led to thousands of people risking and losing their lives every year in the attempt to escape civil war and other crises by fleeing into Europe. The EU governments' only response to this has been to introduce increasingly harsher retaliatory measures. In this respect, representatives of the various governments try to outdo each other with their recommendations and demands.

According to a report in the *Guardian* newspaper, Tony Blair even wants to mobilise British warships to track down "people smugglers" in the eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, he is insisting that in future British and EU development aid will be dependent on the readiness of recipient states to take back rejected asylum seekers. Here he expressly mentioned Somalia, Sri Lanka and Turkey by name.

The pressure exerted by the EU on Turkey to prevent refugee ships from reaching EU countries like Greece or Italy recently led to the Turkish coast guard firing on a refugee boat 20 miles off the coast of northern Cyprus, killing one man and wounding five others.

The issue of deporting people residing in the EU illegally is also a major problem for Otto Schily. He claims that 500,000 people—"under obligation to leave the country" but unable to be deported—want to stay in Germany. He welcomes the intention of the Italian government to fingerprint all non-EU foreigners. He says this is a measure he has already strongly recommended.

When the EU states' recommendations and their current practice in dealing with refugees are more closely considered, it must be said that they largely correspond with the demands of the extreme right-wing parties warned about by both social-democratic and conservative politicians. Everything points to the conclusion that these policies will be pursued even more vigorously when the Danish government—which recently has drastically tightened Denmark's laws concerning immigrants—takes over the chairmanship of the EU on July 1.

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