

Germany: Foreign Ministry under fire in “visa affair”

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For several months, the German media has focused on the so-called “visa affair.” The scandal began with allegations against the former minister of state at the Foreign Ministry, Ludger Volmer (Green Party). Volmer was accused of having abused his office for private business purposes. It was then claimed that a visa regulation he had issued five years earlier had encouraged prostitutes and illegal workers from Ukraine to enter Germany.

Now, demands are being made for the resignation of Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, who is also a member of the Greens.

A parliamentary committee of inquiry is looking into the accusations to clarify whether the visa policy encouraged the mass trafficking of immigrants to Germany, the forced prostitution of women from eastern Europe, and moonlighting by foreign workers.

As is often the case in German politics, the scandal serves to obscure a struggle over other questions, about which the public is to be kept in the dark. It concerns both domestic and foreign policy issues, and it is not an easy task to determine exactly who is behind the intrigues.

What is certain is that it is not only Germany’s opposition parties that are interested in bringing down Fischer—a move that would probably mean the end of the Social Democratic Party-Green Party coalition in Berlin. There are also strong tendencies inside the Social Democratic Party (SPD) that would like to end the coalition with the Greens in favour of a Grand Coalition with the conservative Christian Union parties. Under such a coalition, the opposition in parliament would be reduced to a small minority and the government would have a free hand to carry through its regressive measures in the face of increasingly widespread popular opposition.

There are disagreements within all of the official parties regarding the foreign policy being pursued by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Fischer, who are seeking to delineate Germany increasingly from Washington and establish a closer relationship with Moscow. An end to the SPD-Green coalition could result in a change in foreign policy direction. There are indications that some of the ammunition that magazines such as *Stern* and *Spiegel* have been directing against the Foreign Ministry originates in the Interior Ministry of Otto Schily (SPD), who is regarded as hostile to the Greens and a close ally of the American government.

For their part, the Greens are unable to offer any serious opposition to the visa affair. Volmer resigned from office on February 11. The official explanation was that his resignation had nothing to do with the visa affair, but was rather the outcome of his lobbying activities for the privatised federal printing works.

For a long period, Fischer said nothing, finally only admitting that “errors” had been made.

The visa affair is being exploited to encourage a witch-hunt against foreigners and immigrants. In particular, Ukrainians who have come to Germany in the past few years are being depicted as hardened criminals.

The purpose of this article is not to discuss the intrigues surrounding the

visa affair, but rather the claim, largely uncontested by the media and in political circles, that the relaxing of visa requirements by the Foreign Ministry has resulted in forced prostitution and the massive exploitation of foreigners with no legal residency status. On closer inspection, this assertion proves untenable. A more restrictive immigration policy as demanded by the conservative opposition would not limit the trafficking of young women from eastern Europe or illegal immigration; it would serve to exacerbate the problem.

In 1995, in order to shorten the lengthy visa procedures, the government of Helmut Kohl (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) introduced the “Carnet de Touriste” (CdT), a kind of insurance policy covering medical costs as well as any costs resulting from deportation. The CdT was sold by ADAC, the German Automobile Association, and was accepted in place of a written invitation as proof that the visa applicant could finance both his stay and his return to the home country.

Based on this regulation, the Schröder government, which succeeded Kohl’s, introduced further simplifications of the visa process, which are now the object of criticism.

In October 1999, a regulation was implemented providing that those with short-stay visas no longer had to present proof of their ability to pay their travel costs, or substantiate the purpose of their visit and their readiness to return to their home country. In December 2000, the so-called “Volmer regulation” came into effect, which instructed embassies to grant visas even when in doubt. And in May 2001, as well as the CdT issued by ADAC, embassies and consulates were instructed to accept travel protection documents issued by businessman Heinz Kübler.

In June 2002, legal proceedings were initiated against Kübler on suspicion of trafficking in immigrants. As a result, the Foreign Ministry rescinded the acceptability of travel protection documents issued by Kübler’s business. In March 2003, the Foreign Ministry finally stopped the automatic issuing of visas for those who produced travel protection documents.

Between 2000 and 2002, the number of visas issued by the German embassies in Moscow, Minsk and Tirana did indeed rise. For example, visas issued in the Albanian capital Tirana rose from 8,000 to 19,000 a year. However, the steepest rise was in the Ukrainian capital Kiev, where the number of visas issued rose from 148,000 in 1999 to almost 300,000 in 2001. However, by 2004, this had decreased to 70,000.

The conservative CDU and Christian Social Union (CSU) are now trying to make a connection between the rise in the number of visas granted and the trafficking of eastern European women and forced prostitution. Jürgen Rüttgers, CDU chairman in North Rhine Westphalia, called the government’s visa policy the “greatest violation of human rights since 1945.” The chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party (FDP), Guido Westerwelle, suggested that the government had downplayed the problem of human trafficking, saying, “The visa affair is not about stealing chickens, but a serious government failure favouring hardened criminals.” CSU parliamentarian Michael Glos called Joschka Fischer a

“pimp.”

However, Eberhard Haake, in charge of the Finance Ministry unit investigating illegal workers, told the press, “There was never a mass influx of illegal immigrants from Ukraine.”

The number of recorded cases of foreigners being illegally employed has decreased slightly in recent years. Police crime statistics, which record with utmost care the nationality of suspects, show no increase in cases involving Ukrainians. As a proportion of all criminal offences, those involving Ukrainians account for less than 0.5 percent.

In an open letter, charities dealing with the victims of forced prostitution reported that in recent years only one Ukrainian sought assistance from them. According to police figures, the proportion of Ukrainian women caught up in trafficking has dropped from 20 percent in 1998 to 8 percent.

The campaign of the CDU-CSU and FDP consciously masks the real causes of the billion-dollar business in human trafficking.

In March 2004, Eleonore von Rothenhan, who heads the charity *Stopp dem Frauenhandel* (Stop the trafficking of Women), summed up some of the reasons for the slave trade in women from eastern Europe in a report by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: “Poverty in eastern Europe, an old Nomenclature that collaborates with the people-smugglers and—as cynical as it might sound—lower transport costs [than for women from Southeast Asia].”

The women are often promised employment in western Europe as a waitress, nurse or housekeeper. The prospect of a weekly wage of 200 euros is highly attractive due to the depressed standard of living in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Lured by such promises, the women are smuggled over the border and taken to brothels or sold to German pimps.

The same decline in living standards is also behind the illegal employment of aliens. In the mid-1990s, the wage differential between Germany and Poland was approximately 10 to 1, and it has hardly changed since then. Wage rates in Ukraine, Russia and Belarus are much lower. The unparalleled economic decline of the eastern European states has plunged wide sections of the population into misery and despair. Migration to western Europe to seek work is often the last way out.

Those taking this route are at the mercy of the employers and have no social security entitlements or employment rights. They work in so-called “Three-D” jobs: dirty, dangerous and demeaning.

However, the “informal” jobs market has come under increasing pressure in recent years. An hourly wage of 50 to 80 cents for foreigners living illegally in Germany is no longer the exception. The profits gained from employing such workers go into the pockets of German businesses. As Eberhard Haake reports, “It is predominantly Germans who reap the profits. Sub-contractors bill their customers at the usual rates, although they are paying far less to those they employ.”

Those who have no contacts in Germany before they migrate usually have no chance of finding a foothold in the jobs market. Visa policy plays only a small role in this, since the contact person will provide the necessary means for both legal and illegal entry. In the long run, the restrictive visa policy currently being practiced only encourages the unscrupulous trade of the traffickers, who smuggle people over the border into western Europe and charge those they bring a king’s ransom.

The violation of human rights, which CDU politician Jürgen Rüttgers sees in the present visa rules, are more a result of the immigration system by which Germany and the European Union have made legal entry to western Europe almost impossible. Each year, protecting Fortress Europe costs hundreds of immigrants and refugees their lives. In the last 12 years, approximately 5,000 have died, victims of the European immigration system, according to the refugee aid network *United*, but the real number could be four times higher.

If immigrants survive the border crossing, they are hunted down inland by the police. The fear of being uncovered as “illegal immigrants”

without work permits makes them highly susceptible to exploitation by employers and landlords. Human trafficking and forced prostitution can only prosper from the EU policy of Fortress Europe.

This policy has been extended under the SPD-Green government in Berlin. The simplified visa process introduced by Fischer and Volmer does not testify to a foreigner-friendly attitude on the part of the Greens, as the newsweekly *Der Spiegel* has sought to suggest. The Greens approved new immigration laws that considerably worsen the situation for foreigners and refugees, and have agreed to the mass deportation of refugees. Under the SPD-Green coalition, the number of asylum seekers granted refugee status has gone into free fall.

It is also worth noting that the government coalition has taken on board the xenophobic campaign of the CDU-CSU. The claim that their visa policy means the importation of criminality into Germany meets no rebuttal from the Social Democrats or the Greens.

Even Fischer, who has faced most criticism, has meekly put on sackcloth and ashes and done penitence. He has said nothing against the accusations of the CDU-CSU that the government’s visa policy has encouraged forced prostitution, trafficking and moonlighting. Rather, he has lent the canard credibility.

At the Greens’ party congress in North Rhine Westphalia, Fischer accepted responsibility for the introduction of two regulations making travel protection insurance “even more susceptible to abuse.” In an interview with the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, he added that he had underestimated “the extent of visa abuse” when visiting the German embassy in Kiev in 2000.

That did not prevent the leader of the SPD in North Rhine Westphalia from openly attacking Fischer in the *Tagesspiegel*. The same message can be heard from Kurt Beck (SPD), the state premier in Rhineland Palatinate, who has placed a question mark over continuing the coalition with the Greens. Both these leading SPD representatives have joined the nationalist bluster of the CDU-CSU that the relaxation of visa provisions allowed masses of “foreigners” into the country, whose “moonlighting has taken away jobs from the [German] population.”

A lie does not become true simply through repetition. Illegal immigration is fuelled by Germany’s restrictive immigration policy, which also contributes to a general attack on wages and working conditions.



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