

Germany: Foreign Minister Fischer crawls before the right-wing opposition

Martin Kreickenbaum, Peter Schwarz

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German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer recently testified for 12 hours before a parliamentary committee of inquiry into the so-called “visa affair.” For the first time in history, a German parliamentary committee brought in the television cameras, broadcasting its proceedings in full on the *Phoenix* news channel.

The hearing was preceded by enormous media hype, including speculation that Fischer could resign. But in the end, the event proved to be trivial. Fischer’s evidence produced nothing spectacular. On view was a foreign minister who submissively answered questions, remorsefully admitted some mistakes and only occasionally complained that the opposition parties were trying to “turn visa policy into a scandal.”

Despite isolated vehement exchanges, it was obvious that both the government and opposition agree on the general direction of visa policy: it should be as restrictive as possible, only allowing people to enter the country who are of economic or political use. The dispute in the committee did not concern the direction of visa policy, but only whether in its implementation, the foreign ministry had committed mistakes, and whether Fischer had sufficient grip over his department.

As a former Catholic altar boy used to the rituals of confession, Fischer contritely acknowledged some mistakes: It was an “omission on his part that he had not been informed sooner and reacted sooner.” He confessed that two statutory orders had made the issuing of visas “susceptible to abuse,” thereby partially accepting the reproaches of the right-wing opposition. At the same time, however, he denied that these errors justified his resignation.

The visa inquiry committee had been established at the behest of the opposition, in order to clarify whether the foreign ministry’s visa policy had facilitated the mass smuggling of immigrants into Germany and

Europe, the enforced prostitution of women from eastern Europe and moonlighting by foreign workers. The Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP) had tried to utilise such accusations, which were groundless but nevertheless found a sympathetic echo in the media, to weaken the embattled Social Democratic Party-Green Party government and—should Fischer resign—bring about a premature change of government.

At the same time, their campaign against the government’s visa policy had a distinctly xenophobic undertone. The disproportionate exaggeration of criminality and illegal immigration from the Ukraine was aimed at channelling along chauvinist lines popular concerns over the effects of low wage competition from the East, which increased substantially after the eastward expansion of the European Union.

Significantly, one of the CDU/CSU’s main criticisms is directed against the formulation “in dubio pro libertate”—in case of doubt, for the freedom [to travel]—contained in one of the foreign ministry’s statutory orders. This is a legal maxim that would presumably be taken for granted. After all, wasn’t suppression of the freedom to travel a central criticism aimed at the regime in East Germany when it built the Berlin Wall? But since the borders are now being sealed from the opposite side, this principle obviously no longer applies.

Neither Fischer nor the Greens as a party countered the attacks of the CDU/CSU by defending the freedom to travel as a democratic right. In his testimony, Fischer expressly rejected the criticism that the loosening of travel restrictions introduced under his authority was ideologically motivated. Rather, he argued that they were a pragmatic response to the problems faced by

German embassies in issuing visas, given the existing onerous procedures.

He stressed, however, that this easing of restrictions was only minimal. “In *dubio pro libertate*” did not mean the borders were opened up for everyone. The statutory orders issued by his ministry simply loosened slightly the “room for manoeuvre” provided by the legislation governing aliens. The SPD-Green government had “not created new realities.”

As far as Fischer endorsed any measures easing the freedom to travel, he justified them—like the bourgeois statesman he is—by invoking Germany’s economic and foreign policy interests. The economic and political problems in eastern Europe can only be resolved when “not just the elite but ordinary people” have the possibility to travel, he said. Germany could not afford Russia and the Ukraine being turned “into black holes, into zones of stagnation and unemployment.” According to Fischer, the so-called Orange Revolution “would not have been possible without an opening up of the Ukraine.”

He also referred to the economic significance of funds that migrants send back to their countries of origin. In Kiev, there are entire settlements that were developed by such funds. These funds are indeed an important economic factor. Migrants’ transfers back home far exceed the development aid from the West. In some countries, they represent a two-digit percentage of GDP.

Fischer also stressed the continuity of his visa policies with those of his predecessors in the CDU-led Kohl government. Under foreign ministers Genscher and Kinkel in the 1990s, visa policy had been an area of conflict between freedom of travel and immigration limits. Nevertheless, Genscher had implemented a temporary lifting of visa requirements for Poles. Fischer told the committee, “I find the whole immigration policy of Kohl, Genscher, Kinkel correct.... It was right to open the borders, the stupidest thing we could do, would be to close ourselves off. I have no accusations against Kohl and Kinkel.”

Fischer saved his skin by crawling before the CDU/CSU, assuring them that his foreign policy follows their model. But this will probably only further increase their appetite. While the SPD and the Greens saw an imminent end to the visa affair following Fischer’s appearance before the committee, the

CDU/CSU and FDP have no intention of dropping the matter. They have placed their hopes on the appearance of Interior Minister Otto Schily (SPD) before the committee on July 8, who they hope will not hold back in his criticism of Fischer.

Spiegel Online news magazine also believes the affair is not yet over. The magazine points out that the CDU/CSU still has many more criticisms ready to hurl against Fischer: “Handicapping justice, tampering with witnesses, the possible negligent conduct of government affairs, the chaotic direction of office—far from being over, a whole series of criticisms have not been clarified.” According to *Spiegel*, the statement of SPD chairman Olaf Scholz that the scandal is over is “pure wishful thinking.”



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