

Germany: Erika Steinbach dispute fuels conflict in government

Justus Leicht
16 January 2010

Controversy surrounds the appointment of Erika Steinbach, president of the League of Displaced Persons (BdV), to the Board of the official state foundation "Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation". The dispute serves as a catalyst for the mobilization of the right wing of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU).

The League of Displaced Persons was founded in 1959 and represents a minority of those Germans expelled from territories occupied by the German army at the end of the Second World War. Since its foundation the BdV has occupied a position on the right wing of German politics.

The BdV's current president Erika Steinbach is a member of the CDU and the daughter of a Wehrmacht soldier in Nazi-occupied Poland. In 1991, she voted in parliament against recognising the Oder-Neisse border between Germany and Poland – i.e. for the reinstatement of German territorial ambitions under the Nazis. In 2002 she opposed the EU accession of Poland and the Czech Republic, saying this did not "require jet fighters", i.e. that it was possible to counter Polish and Czech political ambitions without going to war.

The role of the state-financed foundation "Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation" is to officially commemorate the expulsion of millions of Germans after World War II from Poland, Czechoslovakia and other countries, and also to document other expulsions in Europe in the 20th century in "a spirit of reconciliation". In order to prevent the BdV from dominating the organisation, the BdV only has three of the 13 seats on the foundation's advisory board. Moreover, the federal government has a de facto veto over the appointment of the board. This is supposed to dispel any qualms and reservations among Germany's Eastern European neighbours that the foundation could become a platform for revanchist and revisionist demands for territory or property lost by Germany as a result of the

war.

In light of the positions traditionally adopted by the BdV and its various state associations in recent decades, such fears are entirely justified.

Poland has reacted vehemently against Steinbach's appointment to the advisory board of "Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation". In response to Polish objections the new German foreign minister, Guido Westerwelle (FDP, Free Democratic Party), announced he would use his veto to prevent Steinbach joining the foundation's board. Although the BdV has not yet officially nominated Steinbach, both she and other BdV representatives have announced their intention to nominate her soon.

Westerwelle is pursuing a more restrained policy based on defending German interests. The Czech Republic and Poland are neighbouring countries and form an important bridge to Eastern and south east Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union. Poland is an important transit country for gas supplies from Russia and has close relations with Ukraine.

In a critical analysis entitled "Westerwelle's eastern policy", the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)* wrote: "Germany is supposed to play the role of a liaison power to Poland in the EU and NATO, despite or perhaps because of the burdens of the past. Therefore, Westerwelle has sought to revive the 'Weimar Triangle'." The Weimar Triangle was established in 1991 under the wing of the foreign minister at that time, Dietrich Genscher (FDP), in order to strengthen ties between France, Germany and Poland. The annual meetings of the three powers petered out three years ago.

The *FAZ* author criticizes the fact that Westerwelle adheres at the same time to the concept of a "strategic partnership" with Russia. "Avoiding confrontation with Russia, while also enhancing the status of the other Central and Eastern European countries—that exudes the spirit of Genscher. Also, the idea of reviving the

disarmament policy of the 1990s is in line with the thinking of the 82-year-old ex foreign minister...Westerwelle, a newcomer in the field of foreign policy, is willing to accept advice from the father figure, and more: to make Genscher's agenda his own."

One day before the annual meeting of the CSU leadership in Wildbad Kreuth on January 6, Steinbach deliberately stoked up the dispute over the seat on the foundation advisory board. She offered to give up a seat on the board if the government gave up political control over the foundation, especially its veto right on the composition of the foundation board, and conferred more power on the BdV in the foundation board.

If the foundation's agenda were determined by the BdV, it would no longer be necessary to place Steinbach on its advisory board, and her appointment at a later date would be quite possible. Her proposal represents an escalation of the conflict in the flimsy guise of a compromise.

This is also shown by the tone of her statement. It positively drips with German chauvinism: "The character and self-esteem of a nation are shown by how they deal with the victims of wars and their dead.' If we take this statement by the Goethe Prize winner Raymond Aron as a benchmark, things do not look good for Germany. The right of the BdV [to nominate its own candidate] has been deliberately subordinated to political considerations. Compassion and respect for the German victims of flight, expulsion, rape, murder, deportation and forced labour have fallen by the way. ... In the interest of the Foundation and the 15 million German victims of expulsion it is urgently necessary to cut the Gordian knot that has been deliberately tied by political forces."

The BdV presents the matter as if the sole victims of the Second World War were those Germans expelled from Nazi-occupied territory. This is simply a crude expression of nationalism, passing over the crimes of the Nazis.

Steinbach has received support for this "compromise proposal" from sections of the CDU and from the CSU, which traditionally stands close to the displaced persons' associations. So far, Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) has not commented, and Westerwelle has also kept a relatively low profile. However, the signals coming from his periphery tended to be negative.

There are also other foreign policy conflicts between Westerwelle and the CSU. For example, Westerwelle has been restrained in pledging support to the US for sending more German troops to Afghanistan, while defence minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg (CSU) is more positively inclined. Also during a recent trip to Turkey,

Westerwelle reiterated the position of the previous government that there should be an "open-ended evaluation" concerning Turkey's EU candidacy. The CSU strictly rejects EU membership for Turkey.

As a result, CSU General Secretary Alexander Dobrindt called on Westerwelle, as German foreign minister, to represent the interests of Germany. Turkish EU membership would be no good for Europe, he declared.

In the meantime, hardly a day passes without new conflicts breaking out in the government and calls for CDU leader and Chancellor Angela Merkel to demonstrate more "leadership". In this situation, the dispute over Steinbach plays a key role for the mobilisation of the right wing of the CDU/CSU.

An example of this can clearly be seen in a commentary by four leading CDU politicians in the Sunday edition of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. In the article, the CDU chair or their deputies in the state legislatures of Hesse, Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg sharply attack Merkel from the right under the headline, "Dare to be bolder".

They attribute the CDU's poor results in the last general election to the fact that "the conservative wing of the party has not been well served, either personally or politically, but has been unsettled by the chancellor's statements, such as 'I am not a Conservative'." They write, "The conservative strongholds of the CDU/CSU still recall with anger her recent (mild) criticism of the Pope and the lack of support for BdV President Erika Steinbach".

The four predict "a radicalisation of political discourse" and warn of "a permanent strengthening of the FDP" and the "emergence of conservative parties to the right of the CDU." In response, they call for an emphasis on "Christian values" and a "Deutsche Leitkultur" ("German leading culture"), as well as welfare cuts and a stronger state apparatus.



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