

German media, political parties debate granting Snowden asylum

Peter Schwarz
5 November 2013

The issue of how to deal with former American intelligence contractor Edward Snowden has dominated media and political debate since his offer last week to testify in Germany, if the country grants him asylum.

The question of the basic democratic right of asylum plays an entirely subordinate role in this debate. Instead, the plight of Snowden is being manipulated for different policy objectives: in support of an aggressive German foreign policy, to strengthen the German secret services, and for manoeuvres in ongoing government coalition negotiations in Berlin.

This is despite the fact that Snowden clearly fulfills all the criteria for a political refugee who is entitled to the basic right to asylum. He has exposed criminal surveillance methods of the intelligence agencies of the United States and other countries because, as he writes in the recent issue of *Der Spiegel*, they are not only "a threat to privacy", but also to "freedom of expression and open societies".

As Snowden correctly noted, "some governments who felt embarrassed by the revelations of mass surveillance systems have initiated an unprecedented campaign of persecution aimed at suppressing this debate."

The case for offering Snowden asylum is most forcefully argued by Heribert Prantl in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He has called him a "classic case of a refugee," calling for his "safe conduct and the written assurance that he will not be deported." Prantl justifies this demand by saying, "Snowden's actions may be illegal in the US, but what is really criminal are the circumstance and machinations he denounces."

Two days later, Stefan Kornelius refuted Prantl's argument in the same newspaper. The paper's chief foreign correspondent said that the issue in the Snowden case is not democratic principles, but political

interests.

Kornelius does not deny that Snowden "revealed the true dimensions of modern intelligence services." However, he continues, "Before Germany makes a judgment about his future, it is important to weigh up interests, and consider the consequences for relations with the US."

Snowden demanded from Germany "a political decision of enormous importance: With the United States or against it?" The answer, Kornelius writes, based "on all historical experience, on all security policy interests and on political common sense, is not difficult."

In other words, the billion-fold violation of basic rights by the intelligence services must be accepted if it is in the political interest of the German state.

Kornelius' argument reflects the attitude of the German government, which opposes asylum for Snowden, although it was Snowden who revealed the extent of US surveillance of the government in Berlin, including the bugging of the chancellor's cell phone. "The transatlantic alliance remains of paramount importance for us Germans," explained government spokesman Steffen Seibert.

Other commentators support asylum for Snowden or use the affair as an opportunity to argue for more German independence from the US and a more aggressive foreign policy.

In a long contribution for the weekly *Die Zeit*, Heinrich Wefing describes "what once was called the German-American friendship" as a "political mantra that has largely lost any real substance." Blame lies less with the Americans than with the Germans themselves.

"Pacifism" and a "Not-with-us" attitude have, under Angela Merkel, "become almost second nature: Germany will not participate in military interventions,

no matter where, no matter under what circumstances,” Wefing writes.

Wefing adds that Germany looks “to the United States with a sense of political, economic and moral superiority”. However, “Germany is not sovereign where things can be dirty, bloody and evil—in military affairs, in the intelligence community, in the fight against terror. There, it does not aspire to be sovereign. When it comes to killing and dying, rough stuff and dirty tricks, Germany likes to keep its distance, for historical reasons, but also because it is more convenient and morally less complicated.”

As a remedy Wefing recommends that Berlin “insist that the US also conclude an agreement with Germany against eavesdropping, as it has done with Britain or Australia,” and “better equip the German secret services.” In other words, Germany should join the so-called “Five Eyes” espionage alliance, whose activities Snowden has just exposed. Wefing writes that Germany must find “a path between vassalage and resentful anti-Americanism.”

A similar line, but with a more anti-American stance, is adopted by Left Party deputy chairman Sahra Wagenknecht. Writing in the paper *Neues Deutschland*, she proclaims: “A ‘Business as usual’ attitude in the German-American relationship is unacceptable. At stake are the security interests of Germany, not private matters for Merkel & Co.”

To defend “German security interests,” Wagenknecht calls for ending US-German intelligence, but notably does not call for disbanding the German intelligence agencies that monitor broad layers of the population. Other Left Party members have gone so far as to demand the expansion of the German intelligence agencies to defend German interests.

Left Party leader Bernd Riexinger has used the Snowden affair to once again agitate for a coalition government with the SPD and the Greens. He urged the parliament to “give the federal government a shove, and force it to decide in favor of asylum for Snowden”. In the Bundestag, he continued, there was a “320 to 311 majority for receiving Snowden. Three of the four parties are for it,” he claimed, i.e., the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and the Left Party.

In fact, the SPD does not support Germany accepting Snowden. They are merely using the issue as a lever in their current coalition negotiations but would never

endanger the project of forming a grand coalition, nor Germany's relations with Washington over Snowden.

SPD deputy Thomas Oppermann, who is being touted as a future interior or justice minister, made this clear. On the news program “Report from Berlin,” he did not exclude asylum or a residence permit for Snowden, but cited the requirement that “German-American relations remain intact.”

As for the Greens, they support the demand for asylum for Snowden in order to boost their oppositional credentials. During its period of power in a federal coalition with the SPD (1998 to 2005), the party played a key role in introducing anti-terror laws, which have formed the basis for the massive expansion of the intelligence apparatuses unmasked by Snowden.

For his part, former EU Industry Commissioner Guenter Verheugen (SPD) sees the Snowden affair as an opportunity to go on an economic offensive against the United States and challenge the dominant role of Internet companies like Google, Amazon and Microsoft. He calls for European alternatives politically and financially supported by the EU.

“It is not acceptable to permit the US to dominate this economically and culturally increasingly important area under conditions of increasingly fierce global competition,” he told *Die Zeit*. He then gave as an example the European aircraft manufacturer Airbus, which had been successfully established with state funding as a counterpart to the American Boeing company.

A European Internet campaign could also reboot the crisis-ridden German-French relationship, he said.

Not one of the cited commentators and politicians evinced any interest in defending democratic rights and principles. In the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, they all advocate the upgrading of state security apparatuses against domestic social opposition and Germany's economic rivals abroad.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact