

Right wing dictates German refugee policy

Peter Schwarz
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Although the decision by the Berlin grand coalition government to further restrict asylum law was less than 24 hours old, Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière (CDU) undertook the next step to drastically curtail the rights of refugees.

After days of public haggling, the leaders of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD) agreed last Thursday evening on a package of measures that effectively abolish the basic right to asylum for a large group of refugees. On Friday, a spokesman for the Interior Ministry announced that de Maizière had advised the Federal Office for Migration to grant civil war refugees from Syria only “subsidiary protection”.

There are dramatic consequences involved for refugees behind this seemingly innocuous technical term. Up until now victims of war from Syria were recognised as refugees in fast-track procedures, according to the Geneva Convention on refugees (Genfer Flüchtlingskonvention, GFK). As GFK refugees they could stay in the country for three years and during this time bring their families. If the reason for their flight remained after three years, they received permanent residency status.

Refugees with subsidiary protection, on the other hand, receive only a one-year residence permit and are not allowed to bring their family members. When the coalition reached its decision on Thursday it was claimed that only around 1,700 refugees from the Balkans would be affected. If refugees from Syria are included in the new regulation, then in fact hundreds of thousands of refugees in Germany will be separated permanently from their closest family members.

The announcement by the Interior Ministry led to frenzied activity in the government. The SPD protested, and chancellery chief Peter Altmaier (CDU) stated that he had not been informed by the Interior Ministry. Instead Altmaier said he had been informed only via a

phone call from SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel. One month ago, Chancellor Angela Merkel appointed Altmaier to coordinate refugee policy in place of de Maizière.

De Maizière then made a half-hearted retraction of his position, but he had already achieved his goal. Over the weekend, a number of leading CDU politicians spoke out and demanded a limit to family reunification. CSU chief Horst Seehofer and CSU General Secretary Andreas Scheuer gave de Maizière their backing, as did the CDU presidium members Julia Klöckner and Jens Spahn. “In the CDU, everyone agrees with the Interior Minister that family reunification should be limited,” Spahn told *Spiegel Online*.

Free Democratic Party (FDP) chairman Christian Lindner also backed de Maizière. The measure would have “great symbolic action to reduce the flood of refugees to Germany”, he said. De Maizière was “becoming the scapegoat for the mistakes of the head of government”. He urged him to resign in order to “send a signal for a necessary change of direction in refugee policy”.

Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble also supported the Interior Minister. “We must of course limit family reunification, because our capacity is indeed limited”, he told the television program “Bericht aus Berlin”. “I think it’s a necessary decision and I am very sure that we will quickly reach agreement in the coalition.”

Schäuble’s intervention has particular significance. The 73-year-old is considered as the second most powerful politician and power broker in the CDU after Merkel. He is regarded in influential circles as a possible alternative to the chancellor.

Merkel responded to the offensive by right-wingers in the ruling coalition by expressing her confidence in de Maizière. Of course, the minister continues to enjoy the confidence of the chancellor, declared government spokesman Steffen Seibert on Monday. It was just a

matter of time until the next round of coalition talks decided on a general stop to family reunification.

The same process has been repeated in Berlin in recent weeks. The right wing in the conservative Union (CDU/CSU) has set the tone and the alleged supporters of a more humane refugee policy in the CDU and the SPD have followed faithfully behind. De Maizière, the son of a Wehrmacht and Bundeswehr general, has been active for some time as a rabble-rouser. For weeks he has been agitating against refugees and demanding a harsher asylum policy.

In September he claimed—incorrectly—that about 30 percent of refugees who claimed to come from Syria in fact came from another country. In early October he accused refugees of ingratitude. They “go on strike because they do not like their accommodation”, “stir up trouble because they do not like the food” and “fight one another”, de Maizière complained, and demanded that refugees adopt an “arrival culture”.

Spiegel Online columnist Jakob Augstein considers the recent events a “coup”. “The refugee crisis has become a government crisis. Schäuble and de Maizière make policy on their own. Merkel has lost the authority to issue guidelines”, he wrote in his column on Monday. “There is just one word for the behaviour of Thomas de Maizière and Wolfgang Schäuble: Putsch.”

Here, however, Augstein is making a big mistake. De Maizière and Schäuble require neither tanks nor guns to bring Merkel and the SPD into line. They are only too ready to follow the lead of the right-wingers. It is no secret and has been regularly confirmed at a state and local level that the SPD and Merkel’s supporters in the CDU are seeking to limit the number of refugees by any and all means.

The root cause of the fierce disputes in the ruling coalition is not so much the policy to deal with refugees—all of the party fractions advocate deterrence and the tightening up of asylum law—as it is the orientation of German foreign policy. The Union right-wingers agitate for new, even harsher measures to seal German borders. For their part, Merkel and the SPD fear that such measures could blow apart the European Union.

Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn recently warned of the breakup of the EU: “The European Union can break apart. This can go incredibly fast, if isolation instead of solidarity becomes the rule

internally and externally”. Asselborn continued: “When the lid is shut in Sweden and Germany, then I do not know what will happen in the Balkans”. If nationalism predominates this could “lead to a real war”, he concluded.

Merkel and the majority of the SPD are convinced that Germany needs the EU in order to once again play the role of a world power, and that the nationalist card should not be overplayed. Schäuble and the right wing want to impose German dominance in Europe, irrespective of the consequences.

Similar differences had already emerged in the course of the Greek crisis. When it was a question of dictating one brutal austerity package after another to the Greek people, Merkel and Schäuble were in full agreement. But when Schäuble rejected a third loan package for the country and sought to force Greece out of the eurozone, Merkel refused to go along, fearful of a chain reaction throughout the EU.



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