

Divisions mount in German government over refugee policy

Ulrich Rippert
1 February 2016

For the first time in her more than ten years in government, the position of Chancellor Angela Merkel is under serious threat. The dispute in the coalition of Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), its Bavarian sister party Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) mainly revolves around refugee policy. But this issue masks major conflicts on the direction of future foreign policy. The massive swing to the right of the entire German political establishment has unleashed violent tensions in the governing coalition.

Earlier this week, the CSU sent a letter of protest to the Chancellery with an ultimatum demanding a change in direction in refugee policy. If the federal government did not immediately guarantee the effective security of Germany's borders, the Bavarian state government would bring an action before the Supreme Court, CSU chief Horst Seehofer threatened.

SPD parliamentary leader Thomas Oppermann called the threat by the coalition partner to lodge a legal complaint against its own government absurd and impudent. According to Oppermann, "This is the announcement of the collapse of the coalition. In a coalition, one does not write threatening letters, but solves problems."

But the attacks on Merkel are also mounting from within the SPD. Former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder told the business daily *Handelsblatt*, "We will have no choice but to limit the influx of refugees." Merkel had clearly made mistakes at the beginning of the refugee crisis and had sent the "wrong signals," he said. She had "allowed an exceptional situation to become normality." What was necessary now was an "act of liberation" in the form of setting quotas. "In my opinion, there will have to be limits," said Schröder.

It is getting lonely around Merkel, writes *Der Spiegel* in its latest issue. Its cover story begins with the words,

"Never before was Merkel's chancellorship in such danger as at present."

Chief Editor René Pfister recalled that Merkel's response to the refugee crisis last summer found support around the world. She had risen to become a "historical figure." He noted, "The US magazine *Time* named her the person of the year; in the autumn she was considered a promising candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize."

But now the mood has turned, the publication writes, citing a columnist in the *New York Times* as saying, "This means that Angela Merkel has to go." The "script for a coup" had not yet been written, Pfister continued, "but many in the CDU/CSU could imagine Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble taking over the affairs of state."

The debate about refugee policy has continued ever since the chancellor decided last summer, in the face of an escalating crisis in the Balkans, to grant refugees entry to Germany from the so-called Balkan route. Since then, the right-wing media, led by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Welt*, as well as sections of her own party, have made her responsible for the influx of nearly one million refugees and called for German borders to be sealed.

Although Merkel has since made it clear that she supports drastic measures against refugees, the campaign continues. In its threatening letter, the Bavarian state government calls for an immediate and resolute securing of the German border and an upper limit of 200,000 refugees per year. Thus, the right of asylum would be virtually abolished and the border largely closed to refugees.

Merkel has so far rejected such a national solution and warned of a chain reaction. The stream of refugees would accumulate on the Balkan route and destabilize the region, she argues. Any return to national borders would finish off the Schengen Agreement, which abolished almost all internal European border controls. A few days ago,

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said, “Whoever kills Schengen will put the Internal Market in its grave.” Then, he added, the European Union will have been shaken to its foundations.

Merkel is therefore advocating a “European solution” to the refugee crisis, which means she wants to stop refugees at the EU’s external borders. Migrants would either be locked up in huge camps at the EU’s external borders, stopped in Turkey, or immediately returned to Turkey. A small minority would be distributed from there to the EU member states.

But this proposal has met with resistance. More and more countries in Europe are sealing off their borders. It is not only Poland, Hungary, Slovenia and the Czech Republic that have sealed their borders and erected barbed wire fences. Austria, Sweden and Denmark have also reintroduced border checks and are rejecting refugees. A few days ago, the Social Democratic-Green government in Sweden announced it will deport 80,000 refugees.

The Czech government has threatened to bring a lawsuit before the European Court of Justice if the EU decides to impose refugee quotas against its will. Of the 160,000 refugees whose redistribution the EU had agreed last year, only 322 had been taken in by EU countries at the beginning of the year.

Greece and Turkey are resisting the growing pressure from Berlin and Brussels. The plan to build huge internment camps for refugees on the Greek border is meeting with opposition.

Since the beginning of the year, Macedonia has been built up as a bulwark of the EU. The small Balkan country is not an EU member, but has received police officers and surveillance equipment from EU member states to establish a continuous barbed wire fence on the border with Greece. This is intended to halt refugees in their march north into the EU. Greece is thus being put under massive pressure to push the incoming refugees back to Turkey.

Merkel’s rejection of a national limit has nothing to do with humanism or a “welcoming culture.” She is intent on retaining Schengen and the European single market. On this issue, she has the support of German industry and the employers’ associations. They fear massive economic disadvantages if traffic jams of haulage vehicles build up at the border and transporters are forced to wait for hours or even days.

Germany shares borders with nine other countries, more than any other EU member. Approximately two-thirds of German exports go to other European countries. Many

large industrial groups, especially in the auto industry, have organized production across borders and are directly dependent on punctual deliveries direct to the assembly line. A longer or even permanent reintroduction of national border controls could significantly strain freight traffic “and thus result in a loss of wealth,” an unnamed business source told *Die Welt*.

While CSU head Seehofer is stoking up nationalist and racist sentiments, Merkel, with her “European solution,” is pursuing a course that no less aggressively represents German great power interests. She stands in the tradition of her predecessors, in particular, the previous CDU chancellor, Helmut Kohl, who always endeavored to cement German dominance in Europe by using the EU institutions.

Differences over this issue between Merkel and Schäuble had already arisen during the Greek crisis. While both insisted on drastic austerity measures, with disastrous social consequences, Merkel did not agree when Schäuble wanted to refuse Greece a third loan package and drive it into bankruptcy, and thus out of the EU. She feared a chain reaction leading to the collapse of the EU.

Since then, the forces that want to impose Germany’s role as “taskmaster” of Europe, irrespective of the consequences, have gained support. All-night summits, which, after appropriate pressure and blackmail, eventually led to a “unanimous” outcome among the EU states, have been replaced by unilateral national actions, presenting other EU members with a *fait accompli*.

This is accompanied by a systematic build-up of the military. For the time being, this is directed at the Middle East, Africa and Russia. But it is only a matter of time before armed conflict breaks out again in an increasingly divided Europe.

The dispute within the ruling coalition is part of a massive shift to the right in German politics, which, with or without Merkel, is openly returning to the aggressive and right-wing traditions of the Kaiser’s Empire and the Nazi dictatorship.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact