

German interior minister seeks to further restrict rights of immigrants

By Marianne Arens
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The German coalition government of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) is seeking to further restrict the rights of immigrants. Minister of the Interior Thomas de Maizière announced on Saturday that he and Minister of Employment Andrea Nahles (SPD) will present the draft of a new integration law to the cabinet in May. It will include “harsh measures” against refugees who do not comply with regulations.

Among other things, the law will oblige refugees with residence permits to “learn the language, learn a trade” and “behave themselves.” If a refugee fails to meet these demands, his or her social benefits could be withdrawn. De Maizière told German broadcaster ARD on Saturday, “If the integration capacity of the concerned parties is inadequate, there will be cuts to social assistance.”

In addition to this, the interior minister wants to couple the right to residence for refugees, which is already protected under the Geneva conventions, with “integrative capacity,” by which is meant the ability to assimilate into German society. De Maizière says he wants to establish “a relationship between the successful completion of integration and the length of time one is permitted to remain in Germany.” There is already a strictly regulated settlement permit in existence in Germany. De Maizière evidently wants to further tighten these regulations.

He bluntly declared that he wishes to align the status of refugees with that of “legal immigrants,” thereby suggesting that refugees were otherwise essentially illegal. They should only be permitted to stay long-term, said de Maizière, “if they can secure their livelihoods, if they learn to speak the German language, and if they recognised the free and democratic basis of society.”

De Maizière’s rhetoric is no different from the right-wing agitation of Alternative for Germany (AfD). In reality, it is the asylum policy of the German government that has impeded the integration of refugees. Those at the mercy of this policy are first sent to barracks in large numbers, divided according to ethnicity and religion, and isolated from the population. They live in miserable and unhygienic social conditions. Educational opportunities and language courses are for the most part only organised by volunteer initiatives.

Under these conditions, for which the German government is responsible, de Maizière paints a portrait of refugees unwilling to assimilate, whom one must force to “behave themselves” with penalties and deportations. The interior minister has for years attacked refugees in this way. De Maizière is stoking a climate of hostility toward foreigners to push through an extreme right-wing agenda directed against all workers in Germany.

That is made especially clear in his call for residence obligations for refugees with permission to stay in Germany. In the ARD interview, the interior minister declares that “even recognised refugees, at least as long as they don’t have jobs which can secure their livelihoods, must remain where the state sees fit and not where refugees think fit.” He added: “Yes, it is an infringement on the right to freedom of movement,” but such measures served to “prevent the formation of ghettos.”

De Maizière is taking up plans already proposed by SPD chairman and minister of economic affairs Sigmar Gabriel in January. Gabriel told ARD at that time: “I believe we need a condition for place of residence. Otherwise, everyone—including recognised asylum applicants—will move to the big cities. That intensifies

the problem and we can get real ghetto problems.”

Such conditions, requiring certain groups of people to settle in a precisely defined place of residence, have existed for recognised refugees in Germany since the tightening of asylum laws in the 1990s. They were only abolished under pressure from the European Union in 2008. They constitute a clear violation of the Geneva conventions, which ruled that recognised refugees could freely choose their residence and move freely.

Only under the so-called subsidiary protection does a three-month residency requirement still exist. “Subsidiary protection” is granted to those who are not recognised refugees but who cannot yet be sent back to their home countries due to an acutely dangerous situation. This provision is applicable to almost all Syrian refugees. The argument that one must restrict freedom of movement to prevent the formation of ghettos is cynical in several respects. In reality, such measures work directly against integration.

The human rights organisation Pro Asyl writes: “Free choice of residence enables refugees to settle in a place where, for example, relatives can help facilitate their integration. Even new arrivals are dependent on networks that assist them in finding a job or a place to live.” The organisation points out that the initial period after arrival is crucial to a successful integration.

Ghettos are not created because refugees move close to their friends and relatives, but because of the policies of the federal and state governments. So-called social flashpoints, such as Berlin, Bremen, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and the Ruhr area, are a product of the shutting down of mines, steel works and other industrial facilities as well as a systematic policy of social cuts through programmes like the Hartz IV welfare reforms and the neglect of municipal infrastructure.

A few weeks ago, a report by a leading welfare organisation detailed the profound gulf between the upper classes of society and the poor, unemployed, single parents, retirees and disabled. These are the real reasons for ghettoisation.

In the classic right-wing populist manner, the German coalition government is attempting to scapegoat refugees for this situation. In reality, the restrictions on freedom of movement are being put into place to better control and monitor refugees. The authorities want to know at all times where people reside so they can

immediately detain and deport them the moment the political opportunity presents itself.

That they resort to noxious xenophobic rhetoric to achieve these aims and suppress the fundamental democratic right to freedom of movement serves as a serious warning to the entire working class of Germany. With the residence obligations, a police-state regime will be created that can be easily expanded. What is used against refugees today will be directed against all workers tomorrow.

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