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Germany still opposes the enlargement of the Schengen Area

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The Council of the European Union at its session on 7 March cancelled its planned vote on the enlargement of the Schengen Area to include Romania and Bulgaria due to expected vetoes from Germany and also Finland and Holland. This happened even though these countries had met the formal requirements necessary to join the group of states whose citizens can travel across the European Union without passports.The German minister of foreign affairs, Hans-Peter Friedrich, (CSU) expressed his objection already several days before the vote, claiming that Romania and Bulgaria had not been determined enough in combating corruption. Several months earlier, Germany had been considering granting consent to a partial opening of the Schengen Area and allowing citizens of the two countries to travel by sea and air without the obligation to carry passports.

Commentary

- Germany (and Finland and Holland) is concerned by the situation in Romania and Bulgaria, and has been using the issue of the Schengen Area enlargement to put political pressure on those countries, even though combating corruption or the malfunctioning justice system are not linked directly to the Schengen Area accession criteria. Furthermore, the enlargement of the Schengen Area has been presented during the campaign ahead of parliamentary elections in Germany as involving “poverty migration”. This term has been used as a definition for the influx of poor Romanian and Bulgarian citizens intending to receive social benefits. It has been stated in a report from the Council of German Cities that the number of such benefit seekers in the first half of 2012 had grown by 24% to reach 147,000 people. Some experts have called into question the findings of the report, since it also mentions students and expatriate workers who had been working in Germany and lost their jobs among those who groundlessly seek benefits.

- Analyses from institutions dealing with the labour market disprove that fraudulent claiming German social benefits is a major problem. Surveys indicate that since 2007, 80% of immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria have come to Germany in search of a job. 22% of them had higher education and 46% had secondary education. In 2003–2005, Germany thoroughly reformed its system for supporting the unemployed, so it is now much easier for offices to verify whether the unemployed are really actively searching for

jobs. Officials from the European Commission have also taken the stance that it is groundless that the problem of migration with the intention of receiving benefits from the welfare systems of the wealthier EU member states has worsened.

- The good economic situation in Germany is not contributing to strengthening anti-immigrant sentiment for the time being. Any change in this social climate could impair the stability of the eurozone. The free movement of workers, which enables the consequences of recession in countries affected by economic crisis to be cushioned, is one of the pillars of the monetary union. In 2011–2012, the number of Greek, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian workers in Germany increased by 11.6% and reached 465,000 people.

- At the same time, the federal government welcomes qualified workforce from other countries. German entrepreneurs believe that the lack of highly qualified professionals is among the key factors which could affect the growth potential of their firms. The 'blue card' was introduced last year. It authorises workers with higher education from non-EU countries who have received a job offer from a German employee to work in Germany.