Forsaken:

German officials and media turn their backs on victimized whistleblower Brigitte Fuzellier

A Special Investigation
October 30, 2019

For nine years, Kolping International whistleblower Brigitte Fuzellier has been fighting for justice in Paraguay. For these nine years, she has been ignored by public officials, Bundestag members and most of the media in her home country of Germany.

Even when presented face-to-face with the well-documented facts of this shocking whistleblower retaliation case, German officials and journalists still manage to persistently convince themselves to walk the other way and do nothing.

Some of Germany’s most anti-establishment politicians and journalists – including Green Party parliamentarians and a prominent investigative journalist who broke the Panama Papers case – have shied away from confronting Kolping International, a large Catholic charity based in Cologne that is intimately linked to German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s CDU party.

German officials and journalists also repeatedly have dodged questions about how Cologne-based Kolping International spends millions of euros in public funds it receives each year from the German government and the EU.

The case raises uncomfortable questions about the German political establishment that are rarely asked – much less answered – by opinion leaders within the country: How impervious is the firewall between church and state in Germany? Are the two realms colluding to punish a single individual who attempted to expose misconduct within both?

Very few of us could withstand the unending onslaught of reprisals to which Fuzellier has been subjected. If there were a Whistleblower Retaliation Hall of Fame, the people who have gone after Fuzellier for nearly a decade would be charter members.

A Victim of Serial Retaliation

It started in 2010, when Fuzellier revealed evidence of financial irregularities within the Paraguayan operations of Kolping International, a large Catholic charity based in Cologne. She said Kolping had misspent German and EU public funds, some of which Kolping embarrassingly had to repay. People associated with Kolping responded by filing dubious charges of criminal defamation against Fuzellier.

Over these nine years, the retaliation campaign has not let up. People linked with Kolping have filed more transparently phony criminal charges against Fuzellier, convinced
Paraguayan judges to ban her from leaving the country, badmouthed her in the media, and pursued legal actions that could have landed her in prison for years. Kolping also has bullied journalists and activists investigating and publicizing the case, including the European Center for Whistleblower Rights.

Saddled with massive legal fees, her reputation besmirched, and blocked from running her previously successfully Eco-Loofah business, Fuzellier has lost nearly everything. Banks have seized several properties. Her business, which once employed hundreds of native Macá tribe members in Paraguay, has been destroyed. There have been two armed kidnapping attempts on her daughter by unknown culprits who remain at-large.

Now a grandmother in her late 50s, Fuzellier for years has been legally banned from visiting her children and grandchildren in Germany, where she is a citizen. She is desperately trying to save her house – her last substantial possession that remains – from foreclosure.

**Official Inaction**

One would think that German authorities would have stepped in years ago to save Fuzellier from Kolping’s aggression. But not only have German politicians authorities done nothing to help Fuzellier, they actually have taken steps to enable the retaliation to continue.

Starting with the German Foreign Office, diplomats have refused to talk to Fuzellier, much less help her. She was even turned away when she personally presented herself at the German Embassy in Asunción.

Diplomats told Bundestag members last spring that they had spoken with Fuzellier and offered assistance to her. But in fact this never happened, the European Center for Whistleblower Rights has learned. After repeated calls and e-mails by the European Center, the only response from the German Foreign Office has been, “The German Embassy [in Paraguay] does not take a position in the dispute between Kolping International and Ms. Fuzellier.”

The European Center also called and sent e-mails to members of the Bundestag committee that oversees the budget of the German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). At least since 2010, the BMZ annually has given €6-8 million in public funds to Kolping International. The European Center told Bundestag members that the BMZ essentially is subsidizing the retaliation of Fuzellier. The BMZ has not responded, and there is no indication that the BMZ plans to cut off Kolping’s funding.

Moreover, nearly all Bundestag members have balked at helping Fuzellier. The only Bundestag member to respond to the European Center’s calls was the office of Uwe Kekeritz of the Green Party. At first, Kekeritz’s staff was very eager to assist. Among other things, a staff member said she would meet with the European Center, speak with Fuzellier, and help with the investigation into Kolping’s questionable spending of public funds. In the end, Kekeritz’s office did none of these things. “I can’t get personally involved,” the staffer said.

To their credit, Kekeritz and fellow Bundestag members Ottmar von Holtz (Greens) and Eva-Maria Schreiber (Left Party) sent a letter – however tepid it may have been – to Paraguay Attorney General Sandra Quiñonez this past May 3. Falling well short of a demand that the dubious charges against Fuzellier be dropped, the letter gently asked Quiñonez to “take into account the background of the case” and “guarantee an impartial, constitutional and fair
procedure.” News of the letter was published in some Paraguayan media outlets helped to raise awareness of the case.

The letter from Kekeritz’s office fell well short of urging Paraguay’s Attorney General to stop any retaliatory prosecution of Fuzellier. Kekeritz’s staffer explained that “a parliamentarian of a democratic country…cannot send a letter to the judicial system of another sovereign state, telling them what to do. That would be considered a total disrespect for national sovereignty and for the system of checks and balances as a basic pillar of democracy.” Lost in this explanation is the fact that a German citizen’s rights have been trampled upon and her freedom has taken away.

Media Blackout
The European Center also has contacted many of German’s largest and most influential media outlets. It should be noted that many mainstream newspapers in Germany are owned by or affiliated with politically connected companies and individuals. And, many mainstream TV networks are operated by the government itself.

Therefore the European Center only contacted media outlets considered to be among the most independent and enterprising in Germany. Strikingly similar to the behavior of Bundestag member Kekeritz, German journalists initially expressed a strong interest in writing about Kolping International, only to be shied away.

Bastian Obermayer of Germany’s largest daily, Süddeutsche Zeitung (South German Times), who co-led the Panama Papers investigation, initially said he was interested in the story and wanted to speak with the European Center about Kolping International’s financial practices. He never followed up and never responded to numerous calls and e-mails. Eventually Obermayer said, “We don’t have…the capacities to throw a lot of work into this, given our other duties and projects. We can only work on a limited number of projects at a time, so we do have to prioritize – and always end up missing good projects, regrettable.” This explanation is at odds with Obermayer’s initial interest in exploring the Kolping story.

Georg Restle, host of Monitor, an investigative news show produced by the large public TV network Westdeutscher Rundfunk (West German Broadcasting), met with the European Center at its Cologne studio this past January – located coincidentally a half-block from a Kolping office building. Restle’s staff agreed to begin funding the European Center’s research of Kolping and agreed in principle to broadcast a multi-part series on Kolping’s questionable financial and business practices. Like Obermayer of Süddeutsche Zeitung, WDR dropped the story without explanation. A producer in Restle’s office disputed these events and would only say, “We basically do not comment on confidential conversations.”

The European Center also met with a reporter from Taz, perhaps Germany’s most independent and left-leaning daily newspaper, which routinely publishes exposés critical of Germany’s political establishment. During its meeting with the European Center, the Taz reporter took Kolping’s position and argued that the charity’s use of public funds for for-profit purposes is legal and proper. Taz editors did not respond to a request for a comment for this article.

The European Center also spoke with the investigative newsmagazine Stern and the daily scandal-sheet Bild, both of which are known for their edgy coverage. Neither agreed even to meet.
Following the Money
The European Center for Whistleblower Rights is continuing its investigation of Kolping International’s spending of millions of dollars of German and EU public funds, as well as the finances and operations of Kolping’s many closely linked for-profit companies.

Founded in 1847 by revered Catholic priest Adolph Kolping, Kolping’s main purpose was to help needy young people with job training, education, housing and other assistance. Over the past 20 years, however, Kolping has pursued a decidedly more commercial model.

Kolping affiliates operate upscale hotels in at least 18 countries in Europe, South America and Africa – including the 4-star Kolping Hotel Spa & Family Resort in Hungary’s remote hill-country town of Alsópáhok. Other companies include restaurants, mysterious consulting companies, a clothing recycler, a coffee company, a publishing company and various other service providers.

The European Center has submitted a formal request to the German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) for information on how Kolping International has spent the 6-8 million euros in public funds the agency gives to the charity each year.

For more information on this and other whistleblower cases, contact Mark Worth at:

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