

Norwegian festival withdraws Berlusconi documentary after meeting with Italian officials

Richard Phillips
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Last Friday, two days before the 3rd European Documentary Film Festival in Oslo, Norway, Film Institute (NFI) director Vigdis Lian announced that *Citizen Berlusconi*, a 56-minute documentary on Italy's prime minister, would not be shown at the event. Lian made the decision after meeting with Italian embassy officials.

Directed by Susan Gray, the joint US and European documentary, whose title is a reference to *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles' masterpiece about a US media mogul, has been screened in several countries and broadcast on US, Australian and Norwegian television in the past six months. It has never been screened in Italy where the filmmakers face possible legal action and jail.

Liam said that her decision was "not censorship" and that no one had "instructed me (to pull the Berlusconi documentary) ... this was my decision". Liam, however, went on to claim that *Citizen Berlusconi* was "a personal frontal attack" on the Italian prime minister and because the festival was arranged in cooperation with the Italian and other embassies it was "very unfortunate to show this film."

The documentary is not a personal attack on Berlusconi but an exploration of the rise of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, his monopoly of the Italian media and the dangerous assault on democratic rights now being conducted by his government. It details the numerous corruption charges and bribery allegations against Berlusconi and raises numerous questions about his business methods, including his early connections with Socialist Party leader Bettino Craxi, the Mafia and others, which were used to secure lucrative contracts. The film also examines Forza Italia, Berlusconi's party, and its governing alliance with the extreme-right

National Alliance and the separatist Northern League, and the unprecedented legislative changes made to protect and boost the prime minister's business empire.

The decision to withdraw the film from the festival, which constitutes a serious attack on democratic rights and freedom of expression, stunned Norwegian festival patrons and drew angry comments from several newspaper columnists and Stefano Tealdi, executive producer of *Citizen Berlusconi*.

Tealdi told the *Dagsavisen* newspaper: "We've always viewed the Scandinavian countries as the most democratic in the world. [But] this is exactly the same thing that happens in Italy, where there are efforts to eliminate freedom of expression." Mode Steinkjer, writing for *Dagsavisen*, declared: "Not only does this take away all credibility from what should have been a debate-worthy film festival, it also shows how freedom of expression in Europe is under pressure."

Censorship of *Citizen Berlusconi* follows the withdrawal of an anti-Zionist painting from a Oslo art gallery in late February. Gallery owner Andreas Engelstad removed a painting by well-known political artist Chris Reddy after an intervention by the Israeli ambassador, Liora Herzel. The painting, which used the Nazi swastika as the letter "s" in Israel and the US, was, according to Herzel, "offensive" to Jews, Israelis and Americans and therefore had "no place in the exhibition".

While it is not known what Italian officials said to NFI director Liam last week, the decision to withdraw the film is both a capitulation to their demands and glaring demonstration of the methods used by the Berlusconi regime to politically silence Italian artists, filmmakers and writers.

Berlusconi, who is Italy's richest individual, currently controls 90 percent of Italian television, dominates radio, newspapers and advertising and therefore wields tremendous power over what is broadcast and published. In the past three years five television programs have been axed, newspaper editors forced out and journalists, artists and playwrights subjected to legal action and jail threats for daring to criticize Berlusconi. As media commentator Giovanni Sartori notes in *Citizen Berlusconi*, "Freedom of expression is in jeopardy in Italy."

Such is the level of political intimidation against journalists and artists that the media group Reporters Without Borders recently ranked Italy at the bottom of the list for countries in the European Union on its press freedom index.

In 2002, state-owned RAI axed two of its most successful television programs—"Il Fatto" and "Sciuscia"—for being critical of Berlusconi. In April that year, the prime minister accused "Sciuscia" journalists of making "criminal use of public television" after they investigated alleged links between the Mafia and one of Berlusconi's closest associates. In October 2002, a special episode of the satirical program "Blob" was pulled because it lampooned Berlusconi. Entitled "Berlusconi Against Everyone," the show focused on the prime minister's mannerisms during press conferences and television shows.

Last year RAI suspended "Raiot," a satirical program, which had, on occasion, poked fun at Berlusconi. The decision came after Berlusconi's Mediaset television company launched a defamation suit against RAI for broadcasting a "Raiot" episode focusing on the mass media in Italy.

In the past three years Italian courts have also contravened United Nations media standards by sentencing two journalists to 18-month prison terms on defamation charges. Under the pretext of fighting terrorism, the Italian police have raided an increasing number of newspaper offices and journalists' homes.

Anti-terrorist police last year searched the homes of two journalists from the daily *Il Messaggero*, following the publication of articles about police violence at the G8 summit in Genoa in 2001. The journalists were accused of publishing extracts from a secret police report about Carlo Giuliani, the young demonstrator killed during the protest.

These attacks are not confined to television and newspapers. Italian filmmaker Marco Giusti told the Cannes film festival in 2002 that Italian government officials had tried to suppress his documentary about police brutality at the G8 summit in Genoa. In May that year, Luca Ronconi, one of Italy's most prominent theatre directors, was ordered by a government official to remove five-metre-high caricatures of Berlusconi and other government leaders from his theatre production. The caricatures were to be used in *The Frogs*, a fifth-century Greek play by Aristophanes, to be performed at Syracuse, Sicily.

Nobel prize-winning writer Dario Fo is currently being sued for \$1 million over *The Two-headed Anomaly*, his satirical play lampooning Berlusconi. Fo and his wife Franca Rame play the Italian prime minister and his wife, Veronica Lario, a former B-grade movie star. Forza Italia senator Marcello Dell'Utri, who claims that the 77-year-old playwright is "persecuting" Berlusconi, has initiated the legal action. Dell'Utri, a co-founder of Forza Italia, is on trial for laundering Mafia money through Berlusconi's Publitalia advertising firm. He has been accused of persuading the Mafia to back Forza Italia in the early 1990s.



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