

Munich Greens demand cancellation of Russian orchestra conductor's contract

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The crisis in Ukraine has led to sharp conflicts over the future conductor of the Munich philharmonic orchestra.

In February, Russian conductor Valery Gergiev, long-time artistic director at the Mariinsky theatre in St. Petersburg, signed a contract to take over the leadership of the Munich Philharmonic from 2015. However, when Gergiev signed an open letter by Russian intellectuals and artists in March supporting President Vladimir Putin's stance on Ukraine and Crimea, the Greens and the media in Munich launched a hysterical campaign calling for the termination of his contract.

The joint city council fraction of the Greens and Pink List, which controls 14 council seats, insisted that Hans-Georg Küppers, director of Munich's department of arts and culture, personally call on Gergiev to distance himself from his support for Putin.

Fraction leader Florian Roth warned on March 14 that if Gergiev thought he was right to hold onto his position on Ukraine and Crimea, he was "unacceptable as the chief conductor of our orchestra." Küppers and the director of the philharmonic, Paul Müller, initially made a vague reference to Gergiev's right to freedom of expression, but have subsequently agreed to speak to the conductor on the issue when he is next in Munich.

There was already a debate in the Munich City Council last December about Gergiev and a demonstration outside one of his concerts. The protest was in response to an interview the conductor gave to the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* in which he justified Putin's law against homosexuals, arguing it was mainly directed against pedophiles. This statement produced angry reactions from gay rights organisations, as well as protests and attempts to disrupt his concerts.

Although Gergiev distanced himself from these views at a Munich press conference and spoke out against exclusion and discrimination, Green Party and Pink List councillors called his appointment as chief conductor into

question, demanding he receive a "written warning" even though his employment contract had not been signed. The Greens received support from the citizens' centre fraction, which includes the right-wing parties ÖDP (Ecological Democratic Party), Free Voters and Bavarian Party.

The renewed attack on Gergiev in the middle of the Crimea crisis makes clear that last year's concerns over the democratic rights of homosexuals were a pretext for an increasingly aggressive anti-Russian campaign.

The Greens have been at the head of the pro-war propaganda campaign against Moscow for months. Leading representatives of the Greens participated in protests on the Maidan in Kiev with members of the fascist Svoboda, the far-right shock troops from the Right Sector, and leading representatives of US and German imperialism, supporting the overthrow of President Viktor Yanukovich.

Accusations of homophobia against the Putin government also served to justify this campaign. The Green Party's Heinrich Böll foundation organised a number of "scientific" conferences on gender politics and homophobia in Berlin and Kiev, where Green politicians and pseudo-left academics ideologically prepared the overthrow of Yanukovich by declaring Putin to be the main enemy and a more dangerous fascist than the Ukrainian Svoboda.

A new menacing feature of the Greens' policies in Ukraine can now be seen in their attacks on democratic rights at home. They now advocate the monitoring of people's opinions, censorship and professional bans for those with differing views. In this they will not confine themselves to artists like Gergiev who defend Putin's politics.

The Greens have received support from music journalists in newspapers across the country, such as the *Frankfurt Allgemeine Zeitung* (Eleonore Büning) and the

Süddeutsche Zeitung (Reinhard Brembeck).

As Büning asked in the FAZ on 13 March, “Can Bavaria’s capital city afford this?” “Is Gergiev still acceptable for Munich?” And she answers no, “If the Russian military become active in Crimea, if Putin violates international law, Munich could not keep its allegedly most expensive employee, GMD Gergiev, under contract.”

Reinhard Brembeck was slightly more cautious in a comment in the SZ on 20 March. He granted Gergiev the right of freedom of expression, but suggested to him indirectly that it would be best if he decided to leave.

“He alone is responsible for his concerts now being political and not just musical events,” Brembeck wrote. “It is questionable whether a sensitive artist can put up with that permanently. The question as to whether Gergiev will be able, under the given conditions which he has caused, to do what he was selected for by the orchestra—to make the best possible music—is much more interesting than the question of whether he is still acceptable for Munich.” Ultimately, it was Gergiev who had to decide, “If he has the strength to stay the course.”

These and other articles on Gergiev have produced numerous angry letters from readers. “Goodbye freedom of speech!” wrote an SZ reader on March 19. “These days there is only one course and one opinion. I want out of this ‘freedom,’ this country is increasingly losing its way.”

The Greens had called out the “thought police,” stated another reader’s letter. Another wrote, “The contributions in the German media are becoming increasingly grotesque, especially when they are concerned with Russia and Putin. Will there soon be calls for the banning of Russian music and art?”

A further reader’s letter recalled the GDR (East Germany), “Politicians dictate to us who we should love or respect.” Or in reference to the US, “If the conductor was American and he spoke out in favour of the death penalty they have there, no-one would be bothered about it.” No American artist has been compelled to distance him or herself from the US government, although it has militarily devastated countries like Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan and has been responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands. Others recalled the blacklisting of left-wing artists in the US in the 1950s, “McCarthy sends his greeting!”

Against the backdrop of the growing war drive against Russia, the Gergiev affair is evoking ugly memories that shock a growing number of people. An SZ reader

commented sarcastically on future developments, “We’ll take all the scores of Russian composers and pile them in a big heap. Take it to a public place ... let’s say the Feldherrenhalle [one of the scenes of Hitler’s failed “Beer Hall Putsch” in 1923], and set the pile on fire. Out of protest! Against Putin! For human rights! In addition, we could invite representatives of the new Ukrainian government. They would certainly enjoy that very much.”

Another recalled the conductor Herbert von Karajan, who joined the Nazi party twice, made a career under Hitler, but was nonetheless able to continue working in post-war Germany unhindered.

The Greens’ demand for political censorship is a warning. Emerging at the end of the 1970s from various protest organisations and Maoist groups, they have steadily transformed themselves into a right-wing bourgeois party representing wealthy layers of the upper middle class. At the end of the 1990s, they abandoned their pacifism and supported the war in the former Yugoslavia under then foreign minister Joschka Fischer.

Today they advocate positions that would have previously been found only on the far right of German politics. As a reader of *Die Zeit* warned, the Greens’ call for a professional ban on Gergiev bears a similarity to developments in Hungary, where the “top positions in museums, theatres and opera houses are quickly filled according to political criteria.” He added caustically that a law of nature could be applied to the Greens: “When the Greens wilt, they become brown [a reference to the brown shirts worn by the Nazi paramilitary SA].”

The Greens never spoke for the interests of the working class, but rather those of a small layer of the petty bourgeoisie characterised by individualism and egoism. This is why they have no qualms about riding roughshod over democratic rights such as freedom of speech.



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