

# German authorities ban appearances by Turkish politicians

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The authorities in several German cities have prevented appearances by Turkish government officials who wanted to advocate a yes vote in the constitutional referendum of April 16. About 1.4 million Turkish citizens live in Germany who are entitled to vote in the referendum.

The bans were justified on technical grounds. For example, the city of Gaggenau refused to allow an event with the Turkish justice minister, Bekir Bozdag, arguing that parking and access roads would not cope with the expected visitor numbers.

The city of Cologne refused to allow an appearance by the Turkish Economics Minister Nihat Zeybekci at the Porz town hall on the grounds that there was no hiring agreement for this event, because a publicised “theatre event” had been recast as an “information session.” And the city of Hamburg banned a planned appearance of the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu on Tuesday on the pretext that fire protection measures were insufficient.

In reality, the bans are for political reasons. They are taking place against the backdrop of a hysterical campaign to ban all Turkish politicians who support the new constitution, sought by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to strengthen his rule.

Bavarian state premier and leader of the Christian Social Union (CSU), Horst Seehofer, told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that Turkish politicians were abusing their “right to hospitality” when they “promote anti-democratic measures in their country.” CSU domestic affairs expert Hans-Peter Uhl told the *Bild* newspaper such meetings should, if necessary, be disbanded by the security authorities.

In the newspapers of the Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland, Free Democratic Party (FDP), leader Christian Lindner railed against “systematic Turkish state propaganda on German soil.” He called on the federal government to call a halt to it.

Even federal Justice Minister Heiko Maas (Social Democratic Party, SPD) spoke out against Erdoğan himself being allowed to promote the constitutional amendment in Germany. With reference to the German-Turkish journalist Deniz Yücel currently sitting in Turkish custody, Maas told an SPD event in the Saarland, “I think with what is happening there, we are at a point when the time to keep quiet has to be over.”

The most aggressive calls for a general ban on appearances by politicians from the Turkish ruling AKP have come from representatives of the Left Party. In Berlin, Left Party leader Bernd Riexinger demanded, “that the next promotional show for Erdoğan not take place.”

“The Turkish despot is leading the government around by the nose,” he said, with barely concealed chauvinism.

In the *Rheinische Post*, Left Party parliamentary leader Sahra Wagenknecht accused the government of “cronyism with the Turkish autocrats.”

The demand for a ban on appearances by Turkish politicians is undemocratic and reactionary.

Proponents of such a ban say it is justified because Erdoğan is suppressing his political opponents and that the proposed constitutional amendment has authoritarian characteristics. Therefore, as Heribert Prantl wrote in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, “freedom of speech for Erdoğan (and his governmental campaigners) in Germany” means “aiding the elimination of fundamental rights and liberties ...”

This argument is essentially false. Such prohibitions do not defend democracy and freedom of expression in Turkey, but suppress it in Germany. Leading politicians and journalists presume to prescribe to Turkish citizens living in Germany what they may think about, whom they may listen to and who not. In place of political debate comes bans and censorship. In this way, a precedent is created for the suppression of all dissent. The state will

determine what may and may not be said in public.

If the AKP (which after all, won 60 percent of the vote among Turkish citizens living in Germany in the last election) may not express its views in Germany, what about members of socialist parties, which the ruling elites accuse of being “anti-constitutional”? Or what about Muslims, whose faith some right-wing politicians claim is incompatible with the constitution?

That the discussion is going in such a direction is shown by another argument that the proponents of the ban cite against the appearance of Turkish politicians: fundamental rights only apply to Germans.

In its weekend edition, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote, citing the Freiburg law professor Ralf Poscher, arguments for a general ban on assembly were “legally feasible” because Article 8 of the constitution (“All Germans have the right to assemble peacefully and unarmed without prior notification or permission”) was a “German fundamental right.”

On Monday, Heribert Prantl repeated this shameful argument. Pointing to earlier appearances by Erdoğan in Germany, he warned that Turkish government politicians should not be “given the impression that their campaign speech rights in Germany are a kind of customary right.”

The government had permitted such appearances in the past, “even if the right of assembly is really only a German fundamental right.” This was “an act of diplomacy ... because one and a half million Turkish voters live in Germany and because German-Turkish friendship should be strengthened in this way.” But now the question arises, whether the German state was “not only entitled, but even obliged” to “stand firm against this promotion?”

In this way, the basic democratic right to freedom of assembly for hundreds of thousands of Turks living in Germany is made dependant on arbitrary state decisions. No events with elected Turkish politicians—even completely peaceful ones—are to be permitted if their politics do not suit the German state. And this in a country that only 80 years ago denied millions of people all rights under the Nuremberg Race Laws because of their Jewish religion.

When it comes to their own interests, the German political elite use very different standards. Completely forgotten is the campaigning by Chancellor Helmut Kohl (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) in spring 1990 in East Germany, then still a sovereign state, where he promised “blossoming landscapes” if they supported reunification. And in 2014 on the Maidan, German

Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle expressed his solidarity in person with the right-wing forces that organised the overthrow of the elected Ukrainian government. In both cases, representatives of the German government were not discussing domestic German politics among expatriate Germans but were directly intervening into the affairs of other countries.

If it serves their interests, the German government has no problem dealing with autocrats and despots. For example, just last week, Chancellor Merkel visited the Egyptian ruler al-Sisi, who acts far more harshly against his political opponents than Erdoğan, and assured him of Germany’s interest in the stability of Egypt.

Merkel has agreed a dirty refugee deal with Erdoğan himself, which prevents refugees from the war zones in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan from making the onward journey to Europe. Merkel wants to continue this deal, and for this reason, she, like foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel, has been cautious in speaking about the bans on Turkish politicians.

However, there are fierce conflicts among German politicians about how to deal with Turkey. From the start, Merkel’s refugee deal met with criticism in her own camp because a section believed German imperialism was binding its hands in the Middle East if it tied itself too tightly to Turkey. Above all, the CSU and the Left Party have for some time been demanding that Germany should act with more self-interest towards Turkey. And the defence ministry has invested much effort in the arming and training of the Kurdish peshmerga.

In the meantime, German-Turkish relations have reached a low point. Last week, the Turkish foreign ministry in Ankara summoned the German Ambassador Martin Erdmann and conveyed to him its “unease” about the actions of the German authorities. On Sunday, Erdoğan accused Germany of “Nazi practices,” which met with an indignant backlash in Berlin.

The defence of democratic rights and the struggle against Erdoğan’s authoritarian measures cannot be left to the German government and the bourgeois state. They require the mobilisation of the Turkish and international working class.



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