

Germany's "Network Enforcement Law" goes into effect: A move to censor the Internet

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The German Network Enforcement Law (NetzDG) went into effect on January 1. The law, drafted by Social Democratic Justice Minister Heiko Maas and passed by the outgoing Grand Coalition with the Christian Democrats, is a massive attack on free speech. Under the guise of fighting "fake news" and "hate speech", it enables the state to regulate and censor the Internet.

The law requires operators of Internet platforms with more than two million users to remove or block access to "obviously illegal content within 24 hours of receiving the complaint." For "unlawful content," a period of seven days applies. If platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat violate the rules, they face fines of up to 50 million euros.

The law opens the door to censorship of the Internet by multi-billion-dollar corporations, which already work closely with the state. It uses 21 specific legal norms—including slander, libel, blasphemy, sedition, violent images, use of symbols of unconstitutional organizations and violations of privacy through capturing images—as the basis for determining whether content can be reported and its immediate deletion demanded.

The law has already had far-reaching consequences. According to its own data, even before the NetzDG came fully into force, Facebook deleted 15,000 so-called "hate comments" a month. The corporations will now take even more aggressive action to avoid possible fines. To deal with the law, Facebook set up a second "deletion centre" with 500 employees in Essen in November, and further expanded the already existing centre in Berlin.

Even those who appeared as experts at the hearings in the Bundestag (parliament) said that the NetzDG is

unconstitutional. "With the network law, the state is violating its duty of neutrality in the exchange of opinions. This affects a very fundamental basis of our democracy," said lawyer Simon Assion of the German Bar Association. "It is quite possible that the leading figures of the state will exert a direct influence. The Federal Ministry of Justice has access to how social networks implement their deletion mechanisms."

The law is part of an international campaign to censor the Internet. In mid-December, the Trump administration abolished net neutrality in the United States, giving US Internet Service Providers the ability to throttle and block content. At the same time, the European Union is preparing to set up an anti-"fake news" agency to censor the Internet. These measures serve one purpose above all" to suppress and censor left-wing news and views that contradict the official political line of the government and the establishment media.

At the last debate in the Bundestag on NetzDG in December, Tabea Rößner, the spokeswoman for the Greens, justified the regulation of the Internet by declaring: "Quality journalism is one of the bulwarks against irrationality and brutalization of public discourse. It deserves our critical but constructive supervision." Just as the state must "ensure the fulfilment of the function of public service broadcasting", it is "obliged to integrate social networks into the legal system of a free constitutional state".

The expansion of Internet censorship is also supported by the Left Party, which introduced its own bill in the Bundestag. In the debate, Left Party deputy Anke Domscheidt-Berg described the current version of NetzDG as "ineffective", as it did not apply to the Russian platform Vkontakte "and other platforms". She

also found “an initiative of the federal government to increase and train personnel at the investigating authorities” to be lacking.

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), which is now objecting after an anti-refugee tweet by deputy chair Beatrix von Storch was blocked by Twitter, is not against the censorship of the Internet. In the parliamentary debate, far-right deputy Markus Frohmaier said angrily: “Again and again it is repeated here that the AfD wants law-free areas on the Internet. That’s not true. If you had listened to us, then you would have realized we are simply saying... something like that should be heard in the courts and not transferred to private companies.”

The agenda of the right-wing extremists is well known. While spreading their reactionary rhetoric using the cynical argument of freedom of expression, they work closely with the establishment parties and the state to suppress left-wing and anti-militarist views.

When the German government banned the Internet platform “linksunten.indymedia” in August last year, AfD chairman Jörg Meuthen cheered: “The action against the left-wing extremist platform linksunten.indymedia was long overdue... I have been calling for it for more than a year. Now that the election date is approaching, action is finally being taken. Very late and very predictable, but at least it shows: The AfD is effective.”

While the ruling class is adopting the extreme right policies of the AfD, it is aggressively opposed to platforms exposing the crimes of capitalism and the return of German militarism and discussing left-wing and socialist perspectives. In close coordination with German government circles, Google has been censoring left-wing and progressive websites since last April, most notably the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The NetzDG will be used primarily to suppress left-wing and socialist opposition. Maas, who is responsible for the law, had already called for the establishment of a European database of left-wing radicals and for a “rock against the left” concert after the demonstrations against the G20 summit in Hamburg. Now he is using the alleged attacks on the security forces on New Year’s Eve to argue for a massive increase in police powers.

In the 200th anniversary year of Karl Marx’s birth, the ruling class in Germany and around the world is

once again confronted with the spectre of revolution. A recent comment on news platform *Spiegel Online* titled “Welcome, Year of Upheavals!” warns: “The poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer: society has to change so that inequality does not tear it apart—and so we have a turbulent year ahead of us.” And further: “There are now enough people who understand that this will not go on forever—that inequality tears apart every society and eventually leads to struggles and revolutions.”

The efforts of ruling classes internationally to control speech online are aimed at suppressing and blocking the growth of such a movement.



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