

Millions of German taxpayers to finance far right propaganda

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The German government is preparing to give 70 million euros a year to a foundation run by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). The Desiderius Erasmus Foundation will be able to spread its far-right propaganda with taxpayers' money.

According to the guidelines of the German parliament (Bundestag), a parliamentary group is entitled to state funds for its own foundation if it has been represented in parliament for more than one legislative term. The AfD entered the Bundestag for the first time in 2017 and, according to the guidelines, is eligible for financing following the Bundestag elections to be held in September this year.

The party, which has described the Nazi regime as “a speck of birdshit in over a thousand years of successful German history” and called the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin a “monument of shame,” can use the funding to influence research and teaching at universities, promote a new generation of party leaders, spread its far-right propaganda and support its co-thinkers all over the world.

Party-affiliated foundations are not allowed to directly finance election campaigns and other party activities. They are allowed, however, to maintain their own study centres and information portals, organise training courses and meetings, and support party-affiliated students with generous scholarships. Such foundations also play an important role in foreign policy. They maintain dozens of subsidiaries internationally, sponsor co-thinkers and interfere in day-to-day politics in other countries.

The Friedrich Ebert Foundation of the SPD, for example, is active in 100 countries, employs 600 people and supports 3,000 students with scholarships every year. The situation is similar for the CDU's Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the CSU's Hanns Seidel Foundation, the FDP's Friedrich Naumann Foundation, the Greens' Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Left Party's Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. In 2019, the German government supported party foundations with a total of 542 million euros. This is almost three times the total 194 million euros that flowed

into the coffers of various Bundestag parties in the form of election campaign subsidies and other aid.

Funding for the foundations stems from the budgets of various ministries. The foreign and development ministries pay for international activities, the education ministry for scholarships, and the interior ministry for political education. In addition, the foundations receive lump-sums that are not tied to specific projects. These proceeds are used, for example, to organise “study trips” abroad, social “discussion evenings” etc.

The inclusion of the Desiderius Erasmus Foundation in the illustrious circle of government-financed party foundations will enable the AfD to spread its fascist propaganda with state funds. There is no doubt about the extreme right-wing credentials of the foundation. According to Saba-Nur Cheema, the educational director of the Anne Frank Educational Centre, the leadership of the Desiderius Erasmus Foundation is made up of “race theorists and conspiracy ideologists, völkisch pseudo-scientists and hardcore, right-wing extremists from the milieu of the Identitarian movement and Götz Kubitschek's Antaios publishing house.”

The chairwoman of the foundation is Erika Steinbach, who headed the revanchist Federation of Expellees from 1998 to 2014 and sat in the Bundestag for the CDU from 1990 to 2017. At the beginning of 2017, she quit the CDU to protest against the acceptance of refugees in Germany. Steinbach is notorious for her relativisation of Nazi crimes. Last year, she attracted attention because she denounced Kassel district president Walter Lübcke on Twitter for accommodating refugees in the region. Four months later, Lübcke was murdered by a neo-Nazi. The family's lawyer accuses Steinbach of complicity in Lübcke's death.

With state funding, the AfD Foundation will be able to finance the work of postgraduate students and other students in departments of far-right professors—such as the Berlin historian Jörg Baberowski—who are intent on rehabilitating National Socialism. Baberowski defends the Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte, dedicated his last book to the Nazi “crown

jurist” Carl Schmitt, and seven years ago declared that Hitler was “not vicious.” When the AfD Foundation was founded in 2018, it came as no surprise that Baberowski was proposed as a member of the board of trustees, along with the social democratic racist Thilo Sarrazin.

Far right professors are already mobilising at universities. Only a fortnight ago, 70 academics, including Baberowski, founded a “ Network for Academic Freedom ,” which denounces any criticism of right-wing and historical revisionist positions as an attack on academic freedom.

There is no legal basis for the financing of the AfD foundation; such funding relies only on guidelines issued by the Bundestag. A majority in the Bundestag has until now opposed any legal regulation of state subsidies to party-affiliated foundations. The decision as to whether the AfD Foundation will receive the state funds rests with the Bundestag’s budget committee and there is every indication the committee will approve the funding.

Such an approach would be in line with the previous attitude of the Bundestag parties towards the AfD, which has been deliberately built up and promoted by the ruling class. The AfD has already received huge amounts of funding from the state. In 2018 and 2019, for example, the AfD received more than 10 million euros in state support each year. This does not include the lucrative parliamentary remuneration, expense allowances, other benefits and staff salaries paid to all deputies.

The German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) welcomed the heads of the AfD’s parliamentary group to his official residence after the last federal election, and the Bundestag parties elected AfD representatives to head important parliamentary committees. Once again there was no legal basis for these measures, just as the AfD has no legal right to funding for its foundation; the only justification are the guidelines of the Bundestag.

One consequence of this support for the AfD is that the head of the Bundestag’s budget committee, which decides on funding for foundations, is the AfD deputy, Peter Boehringer. Eleven other AfD representatives also sit on the committee, including former CDU deputy Martin Hohmann, a close friend of Erika Steinbach.

The German government has failed to respond to protests against the state funding of the right-wing extremists. Meron Mendel, director of the Anne Frank Educational Centre in Frankfurt, reports in the *taz* newspaper that he has not even received an acknowledgement from the minister’s office in response to a petition with 6,000 signatures he sent to the Ministry of the Interior.

If, contrary to expectations, the Bundestag fails to immediately provide funding for the foundation, the AfD is likely to sue for state subsidies at the Federal Constitutional

Court. It has undertaken such appeals on two other occasions, but in cases involving much smaller sums. Both of the AfD appeals were turned down by the Court, but only on purely formal grounds. The court did not rule on the substance of the cases.

Ultimately, the state funding of the far-right is not a legal, but a political question. For years, the AfD, whose leading personnel is largely recruited from other Bundestag parties and the state security agencies, has been systematically promoted by the ruling elites. The ruling Grand Coalition (Social Democratic Party and the conservative CDU and CSU) has largely adopted the AfD’s policies of repelling and repressing refugees and building up state and military forces at home and abroad. In Thuringia, the CDU and FDP formed an alliance with the AfD to elect a state premier, who only resigned following nationwide protests.

At universities, far-right professors like Baberowski are defended by all of the political parties. The Socialist Equality Party, however, which criticised Baberowski for trivialising the role of Hitler and which fights for a socialist program against capitalism, fascism and war, has been placed under surveillance by Germany’s domestic intelligence agency (Office for the Protection of the Constitution, BfV).

While the AfD Foundation can look forward to receiving millions from the state treasury, the Berlin finance office has withdrawn non-profit status for the Association of Those Persecuted by the Nazi Regime (VVN-BdA), which includes Auschwitz survivors such as Esther Bejarano. Accused of alleged “left-wing extremist influence,” the existence of the organisation is now under threat.

The reason for the official support for the AfD and its foundation is growing social polarisation, which is being further exacerbated by the Corona crisis. Faced with the threat of class struggles, Germany’s establishment parties are closing ranks and moving collectively to the right. As was the case in the 1930s, the international ruling class is again turning to authoritarian forms of rule.



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