

Leading filmmakers protest German culture minister's assault on the Berlin Film Festival

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Leading international filmmakers and actors have condemned the manner in which Germany's culture minister, Claudia Roth (Green Party), is undermining and seeking to influence the country's main film festival, the Berlinale (Berlin International Film Festival).

At the start of July, Roth announced cuts to the Berlinale budget of over €2 million [\$US2.1 million], which would mean cutting the number of films shown by over a third and the elimination of entire sections from the festival's programme. One month later, Roth intervened to demand an end to the current dual leadership structure of the festival in favour of a single figure ("intendant"). It was also announced that the contract of the current artistic director of the festival, Italian-born Carlo Chatrian, would not be renewed.

Chatrian, expressing fears that due to these diktats his freedom to choose films on their merit would be compromised, told *Variety* magazine: "I've always said that I was fine with other forms of governance, as long as my freedom in composing the program was preserved. The public announcement, on August 31, made me completely aware that the conditions for me to continue as artistic director after March 2024 were no longer there."

An open letter signed by over 470 directors and actors, including Martin Scorsese, Radu Jude, Joanna Hogg, Claire Denis, Bertrand Bonello, M. Night Shyamalan, Kristen Stewart, Ryusuke Hamaguchi and Margarethe von Trotta, conveyed the concern and anger of film artists over these developments. The letter states: "We, a diverse group of filmmakers from all over the world, who have deep respect for Berlin International Film Festival as a place for great cinema of all kinds, protest the harmful, unprofessional, and immoral behaviour of state minister Claudia Roth in forcing the esteemed Artistic Director Carlo Chatrian to step down despite promises to prolong his contract."

The letter notes that despite difficult circumstances, "pandemic, financial restrictions, and a deteriorating festival center around Potsdamer Platz," recent festivals under Chatrian's guidance were "very much alive, full of positive surprises and, despite a smaller number of films shown, very popular, on par with pre-pandemic times." The letter calls Roth's "demand for a strong hand," i.e. "intendant,"

"politically backward." It concludes: "We strongly demand to prolong [sic] Carlo Chatrian's tenure and repair the damage done to this essential film festival."

Germany's culture ministry provides around one-third of the Berlinale's budget. The rest of the festival's finances are covered by commercial sponsorship and ticket sales to the public, with the Berlinale famous for drawing in huge crowds of cineastes, as well as critics and the press.

Along with other film festivals worldwide, the Berlinale is confronted with a series of challenges due to the withdrawal of major sponsors (in the case of Berlin, Germany's leading auto companies and the French cosmetics giant L'Oréal), the resurgent COVID health crisis and competition from streaming agencies.

Most of the commentaries in the German press have pointed out these factors and have decried the crude manner with which Roth dispensed with Chatrian's services, described by one newspaper deprecatingly as a "film nerd" who "clearly preferred to sit in a cinema rather than having a cappuccino with film bosses in order to bag future gala premieres."

Claudia Roth's "Green Culture"—Make war, not art!

In fact, much more is at stake. A fortnight ago, Roth declared that the Berlinale should live up to its claim to be "the largest public festival and a political film festival." Christian Goiny, the media policy spokesman for the right-wing Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which governs Berlin in a coalition with the Social Democratic party (SPD), expressed a similar opinion. Goiny told the daily *BZ* that the Berlin Senate could possibly support the Berlinale with a "lower million amount," but only if the financial contribution is "accompanied in terms of concept and content."

In other words, the Berlinale is to be more closely controlled by the government with regard to its political content. Against the background of Berlin's reactionary politics and Roth's cultural policy in particular, this is a serious warning.

After taking office as Germany's first Green culture minister,

Roth announced her so-called “Green Culture” programme, which was supposed to focus on defending a diverse, free and independent culture and media landscape. This was nothing but propaganda. The real priorities of Roth’s ministry and the federal government are becoming increasingly clear: massive cuts to the arts and culture budget to free up billions for the biggest military build-up in Germany since Hitler. In addition to next year’s cuts to the Berlinale budget, the latest draft for the 2024 cultural budget provides for savings in the cultural sector of about 10 percent (€254 million).

At the same time, the Green Party foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, and her colleagues in parliament have approved an extra €100 billion for the German army (over 50 times the culture budget for 2024!) in addition to the €22 billion it has donated in weaponry to Ukraine for its “war against Russia” (Baerbock addressing the Council of Europe).

Roth was one of the first German MPs to visit Ukraine and declare her support for the regime of Volodymyr Zelensky after the commencement of the war. In an interview in the *taz* newspaper (26. 2. 022), which is sympathetic to the Greens, Roth was asked if she approved of Germany sending weapons to Ukraine. Roth replied: “You are addressing this question to a Green politician who is responsible for culture, who with great conviction took part in the big peace demonstrations of the past, who stood up for a restrictive arms export policy and was convinced there should be no German arms exports to crisis areas.”

And then, lining up with all those who choose to ignore the role of the US and NATO in provoking the war, Roth concluded that “it’s right to provide Ukraine with armaments to whatever extent we can.”

Also referencing the war in Ukraine, Roth gave the keynote speech at this year’s Berlinale, asserting that anyone “who makes films and shows films in dark times is resisting the absence of freedom.” Roth then joined the then Ukrainian ambassador, Andrij Melnyk, an open admirer of Ukrainian fascist, antisemite and Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera, in the audience for a showing of the vile pro-NATO propaganda film *Superpower* by Sean Penn.

In line with the Green Party’s support for NATO and the far-right regime in Kyiv, Roth’s ministry has sought to penalise and denounce leading Russian and Eastern European artists and musicians such as conductor Valery Gergiev, opera singer Anna Netrebko and concertmaster Lorenz Nasturica-Herschcowici. In addition, Russian flags were banned in Germany at celebrations to mark the liberation of Europe from Nazism on May 8 and 9. Green politicians have also sought to diminish the role of the Soviet Union in World War II at the Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, which keeps alive the memory of the crimes of German imperialism during that bloody conflict.

Roth’s highly selective interpretation of defending culture was also evident in February of this year when she sought to silence the principled critic of the Ukraine war, the rock

musician Roger Waters. Claiming that Waters was a “conspiracy theorist,” while condemning his support for the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) and his criticism of Israel, Roth (in younger years the manager of an alternative German rock band) urged concert organisers to ban Waters from their premises, “and if they (concerts) should still take place, that he plays in front of empty halls.” Waters had a hugely successful tour in Germany.

Roth followed up her broadside against Waters with a campaign at this year’s Documenta art exhibition, denouncing the Indonesian artistic collective Ruangrupa of being guilty of antisemitism. As a result of the campaign by Roth and broad sections of the German media, which equated criticism of Israel with antisemitism, the Ruangrupa exhibition space was vandalised and the group subjected to death threats.

This list of attacks on the democratic right to free speech and culture on the part of Roth’s culture ministry could be extended at length. In connection with the political censorship of the Mauritanian writer and former Guantánamo prisoner, Mohamedou Ould Slahi, the WSWS wrote: “A pernicious form of political censorship is developing in German cultural circles and in the media. Progressive artists and critics of the establishment are being falsely accused of antisemitism and then mercilessly persecuted. Germany’s Ministry of Culture headed by Claudia Roth (Green Party) is increasingly being transformed into a Ministry for Censorship.”

The latest offensive by Claudia Roth against the Berlin Film Festival must be seen within this broader context. The one-time pacifist Green Party has transformed into a virulent advocate of war and militarism. From the standpoint of the Greens, the advancement of German imperialist interests requires battering down the hatches. The budgets for the arts and culture are to be slashed and subordinated to the war effort while dissident voices are silenced.

Such developments are not restricted to Germany. The struggle for the freedom of culture and the arts increasingly rests with workers, who, exemplified by the current actors’ and screen writers’ strikes in the US, have taken to the streets to oppose the cuts and the restrictions imposed by the capitalist profit system.



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