

Berlin Senate deepens cuts to the city's cultural sector

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Following the resignation of Culture Senator Joe Chialo (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and the swift nomination of former State Secretary for Culture Sarah Wedl-Wilson to replace him, the Berlin Senate, a coalition of the CDU and Social Democratic Party (SPD), is preparing to intensify the brutal cuts already imposed on the city's cultural sector.

Chialo justified his resignation last Friday with the far-reaching austerity measures decided by the Senate last year. In a written statement he said that he had “supported the required cuts in the culture budget with a heavy heart, conscious of our shared responsibility for the city.” However, the further cuts now planned would “cut too deeply into existing plans and objectives.” They could lead to “the imminent closure of cultural institutions known throughout Germany,” which was something he said, he could not support.

This statement is, of course, absurd. Chialo, who previously worked as a music manager, has always supported the cuts. According to various press reports, he even submitted proposals last year that were almost twice as extensive as the measures ultimately adopted.

In addition, Chialo was responsible for the attempt to introduce a so-called “democracy clause” to check the “understanding of democracy” of recipients of public funding. Particularly important to him was an “anti-Semitism clause,” which would have effectively banned any criticism of the state of Israel and its genocide in Gaza. Anyone who expressed criticism of Israel would be excluded from funding. The clause met with fierce protest in the cultural scene and was ultimately withdrawn due to legal concerns.

Most recently, Chialo was being discussed as a possible Culture Minister at a federal level. Instead, however, the CDU nominated the far-right media entrepreneur Wolfram Weimer for the post.

In fact, Chialo's resignation preempted his dismissal. There was growing criticism within the Senate that he was not defending and enforcing the austerity measures aggressively enough. For example, he did not attend the “Culture Dialogue” he had initiated with selected representatives of Berlin's art and culture scene, even though it was intended to curb protests against the cuts.

Instead, the measures were defended by the Berlin Mayor Kai Wegner (CDU) and State Secretary Wedl-Wilson. Berlin city hall had apparently come to the conclusion that Chialo was not in a position to push through the massive cuts in the city's cultural landscape against growing opposition.

The cuts decided so far are huge: 130 million euros [US\$144 million] will be cut this year alone, 149 million in 2026, and another 164 million in 2027. The impact on the independent arts scene and smaller institutions will be particularly dramatic. It is already clear that many will not survive in the coming years. Even renowned institutions such as the Deutsches Theater and the Schaubühne could find themselves in existential trouble. The Deutsches Theater has already cut 1.6 million euros from its budget.

It is evident this is an unprecedented cutback that will result in massive job losses and wage cuts. Wedl-Wilson is now supposed to push this program through for the state government.

The 56-year-old independent cultural manager was previously rector of the Hanns Eisler Academy of Music in Berlin. Her statement that “no further cuts in the cultural sector can be decided upon” is empty rhetoric. Immediately after her appointment, she identified new potential savings in cultural institutions. The latter will be compelled to work more closely together to reduce costs—a well-known means of rationalization. Berlin's three opera houses, the

Deutsche Oper, the Komische Oper and the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, together with the Staatsballett Berlin and Stage Services, were merged back in 2004 to form the Berlin Opera Foundation and since then budgets have been repeatedly cut and jobs eliminated.

The funds currently approved are insufficient to pay the contractually agreed wages at the city's state-subsidized theaters over the next three years. The Senate is therefore planning a legal change: The theatres affected — including the Volksbühne, the Gorki Theater, the Deutsches Theater, the Theater an der Parkaue and the Konzerthaus— are to be converted into public foundations. Around 1,100 employees would be affected. With the spin-off, they would no longer be covered by the contract agreement for the federal states (TV-L), which would automatically result in a reduction in wages.

At the same time, the new legal form represents the first step toward complete privatization. As state secretary, Wedl-Wilson has already commissioned a review of this issue. Remarkably, the proportion of theatres organized privately in Germany has risen from 20 percent in 1990 to 45 percent in 2022—a clear trend toward commercialisation and the dismantling of public funding for culture.

The “democracy clause” is also to be reintroduced in a new, supposedly legally secure form. It is intended not only to safeguard process of implementing cuts, but also to be used against non-conformist and/ or politically unpopular institutions and artists. Berlin's Justice Senator, Felor Badenberg (CDU), is even planning a regulation that extends beyond the cultural sector. She stated that subsidies should not be paid to “enemies of the constitution.” Whoever or whatever falls under this catch-all term would ultimately be a matter of interpretation—in effect, giving the German secret services influence over cultural funding, with all the ominous implications of that!

Like Wegner, Wedl-Wilson also called for “more revenue” from cultural institutions when she took office. Mayor Wegner had previously criticized the subsidy practice: “I think we need to get away from the mentality that we need more money from the state.” Theatres accordingly should raise ticket prices to compensate for missing subsidies—with the effect that access to culture will increasingly become a privilege for the wealthy.

The CDU and SPD are thereby implementing the anti-culture agenda of the extreme right. The culture spokesman for the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD) Robert Eschricht welcomed Chialo's resignation, saying that it had not yet been possible to “push through the democracy clause against left-wing resistance” and “cut the Gordian knot of the over-subsidized and aloof culture bubble.”

Wegner and Wedl-Wilson can also count on the support of the opposition parties in the Berlin House of Representatives. The Green Party faction leaders, Bettina Jarasch and Werner Graf, called for a swift continuation of the austerity policy following Chialo's resignation, demanding that: “Kai Wegner, take over.” Anne Helm and Tobias Schulze of the Left Party, which itself provided the culture senator in the last two legislative periods, also welcomed the quick succession and wished Wedl-Wilson “much success.”



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