

Debanking: How German banks suppress fundamental democratic rights

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In Germany, debanking is increasingly being used as a weapon to deprive left-wing parties, aid organizations, publishers and critical journalists of their livelihoods, even though they have not broken any laws or been formally banned.

Financial institutions are terminating the accounts of those affected, although they have often been customers of the banks for years or decades. They are then no longer able to pay their bills, collect membership fees and donations or, in the case of solidarity organizations, provide assistance to those persecuted by the state. When they ask for a reason, they are refused an answer on the grounds of business secrecy. Opening a new account at another bank is only possible after a lengthy search, costly legal proceedings, or not at all.

Basic democratic rights protected by the Constitution—such as freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom of association—are thus undermined and eliminated without the public knowing about it or being informed of the reasons. Banks, intelligence agencies and government representatives are working hand in hand behind the scenes. Donald Trump's government is also involved, using sanctions against alleged "terrorists" and the dominance of American financial service providers to put pressure on German financial institutions.

Far-right organizations and journalists are also affected and were originally used to justify debanking. Now, however, it is increasingly the left that is being targeted. The closure of bank accounts belonging to left-wing organizations is part of an authoritarian shift that is taking place not only in the US, but in Germany and throughout Europe as well. Any critical voice against armament, war, social cuts and layoffs is to be intimidated and silenced.

The Civicus Monitor platform, which assesses the state of democratic freedoms in 198 countries in terms of five categories, has downgraded Germany from the highest level, "open," to the middle level, "restricted," in just two years. Germany is now on a par with Hungary, where Viktor Orbán is heading an authoritarian regime.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP), the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), was the victim of debanking as far back as summer 2024. After more than 50 years of smooth business relations, Postbank terminated the party's account. A year later, Mehring Verlag, the leading publisher of Trotskyist writings in Germany, was also affected. Postbank gave no reasons for the terminations, but it was obviously a case of political censorship.

The accounts of the Maoist MLPD, the Israel-critical "Jewish Voice for a Just Peace in the Middle East" and other organizations were also blocked at that time. The "Jewish Voice" successfully fought the blocking of its account by the Berliner Sparkasse through two instances and its case was subsequently upheld by the Berlin Court of Appeal.

Nevertheless, such attacks have become more frequent in recent times. Significantly, it is no longer only private banks such as Postbank, a subsidiary of Deutsche Bank, that are playing a leading role, but also savings banks, which are obliged to remain politically neutral and respect

fundamental rights, as well as the cooperative bank GLS, which publicly poses as socially, ecologically and diversely open-minded.

GLS Gemeinschaftsbank eG, based in Bochum, where the SGP also maintains its new account, has closed the accounts of several organizations in recent weeks: the German Communist Party (DKP) and all its party branches, the Rote Hilfe (Red Aid) and Anarchist Black Cross (ABC) from Dresden. Rote Hilfe a few days previously had already lost its accounts with Sparkasse Göttingen.

This is despite the fact that savings banks, as public-law institutions, have a kind of basic service mandate, as a spokesperson for Sparkasse Göttingen confirmed to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: "According to established case law, we can only refuse to maintain an account if parties or political groups have been banned—even if they have already been classified as anti-constitutional." He did not answer the question of why they had terminated Rote Hilfe's account, citing "data protection" reasons. Recently, savings banks had repeatedly emphasized that they were unfortunately not allowed to terminate accounts held by far-right organizations such as Freie Sachsen or the AfD.

Individual critical journalists are also affected by debanking. In December, Sparkasse Karlsruhe terminated the account of freelance journalist and YouTuber Flavio von Witzleben, who considered the measure an "attempt at intimidation." Back in February, Commerzbank subsidiary Comdirect terminated a donation account belonging to publicist and filmmaker Gaby Weber, which she used to collect funds for court cases to enforce the Freedom of Information Act. Among other institutions, Weber had sued the Federal Chancellery, the foreign intelligence service BND, and the Deutsche Bundesbank for access to files for the purpose of journalistic research.

DKP—fundraiser for Cuba

At the end of October 2025, GLS informed the DKP, with a terse reference to its general terms and conditions (GTC), that all accounts of all party organizations would be closed with effect from the end of the year. It did not give a specific reason.

However, there are clear indications as to why: in September, a GLS employee sent an urgent email requesting information on the use of the accounts. In particular, the bank requested information on a fundraising campaign for Cuba.

The DKP responded in a timely manner and confirmed that it was collecting donations for partner projects in Cuba and transferring them there. The party's response was immediately followed by the termination of its account. GLS press spokesman Lukas Feldmann told the newspaper *Junge Welt* that the termination had been carried out "in accordance with legal and regulatory requirements" that had to be complied with.

He did not, however, specify these requirements. Political parties in Germany are not prohibited from carrying out fundraising campaigns, including for Cuba. There are no German or EU sanctions that would prohibit the DKP from collecting donations for humanitarian aid or solidarity projects in Cuba.

The EU maintains full diplomatic and economic relations with Cuba. The 2016 Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement (PDCA) even explicitly promotes exchange; there is no ban on business relations or other financial transactions. Cuba is also not on a current list published by the Federal Financial Supervisory Authority (BaFin) of countries that allegedly pose risks to the international financial system, for example with regard to “money laundering” or “terrorist financing.”

However, under President Trump, the US has once again classified Cuba as a “state sponsor of terrorism” and tightened sanctions against the island nation. These sanctions are not recognized internationally, and the UN General Assembly regularly condemns the US embargo against Cuba almost unanimously.

The EU had already issued a regulation in 1996 to protect against such sanctions by a third country. The annex to the regulation explicitly mentioned the US sanctions against Iran and Cuba. The so-called EU Blocking Regulation even contains an explicit prohibition on compliance, which means that no one in the EU may comply with the sanctions. The regulation is applicable law throughout the EU. GLS therefore did not comply with “legal and regulatory requirements” when it terminated the account. It is much more likely that it violated applicable EU law.

In June 2025, the Higher Regional Court of Frankfurt/Main ruled that the termination of an account whose holder was alleged to have violated US sanctions by a major German bank was unlawful.

Anarchist Black Cross Dresden: Termination without notice

GLS terminated the account of the Anarchist Black Cross (ABC) association in Dresden without notice in mid-November. According to GLS’s terms and conditions, termination without notice is only permissible “if there is an important reason that makes it unreasonable for the bank to continue, even taking into account the legitimate interests of the customer.” These are very high legal hurdles.

However, the bank is said to have only told ABC that there was a “valid reason” without specifying what this reason was. Private accounts of associated persons were also terminated. ABC condemned the bank’s attack as “an example of how liberal forces repeatedly encourage a shift to the right,” but cannot understand the reasons itself. “At this point in time, we can only speculate as to which of our activities have led to the association being subjected to such measures,” ABC said in a statement.

According to its own statements, ABC has been “collecting donations for (political) prisoners in Germany for years,” but also for opponents of the regime in Belarus and Russia and for war victims in Ukraine.

Rote Hilfe—pressure from Trump

Rote Hilfe is a nationwide, broad political left-wing solidarity organization with around 19,000 members that has been in existence for over 100 years, according to its own information. It supports people who are affected by state repression because of their political activism through legal support, public relations work and financial assistance with the costs of repression.

The termination of its accounts by Sparkasse Göttingen and GLS within a few days is directly attributable to pressure from the US. At least, that is the association’s view. “In Rote Hilfe’s assessment, the closely spaced terminations are directly related to the decision by the US government under Donald Trump to list so-called ‘Antifa Ost’ as a foreign terrorist organization,” it said in a statement.

On November 13, the Trump administration declared “Antifa Ost, also known as the Hammer Gang,” a “foreign terrorist organization.” In fact, there is no organization by that name. However, a handful of anti-fascist individuals have been arrested in Germany and Hungary, charged, and in some cases convicted, of violently attacking and injuring neo-Nazis, including with hammers.

In Germany, they are accused of forming a criminal, but not a terrorist, organization. The German intelligence Service (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, BfV) does not regard them as a stable organization, but rather a network of individuals that has been “significantly weakened” by convictions, trials and arrests.

Nevertheless, “Antifa Ost” is now on a sanctions list of the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), an agency of the US Department of the Treasury. Anyone who, in the opinion of the US government, does business with individuals or organizations in any way “associated” with Antifa can therefore become the target of so-called secondary sanctions. “Banks that are associated with individuals or organizations on US terrorist lists face sanctions, including exclusion from the SWIFT international payment network,” according to a statement by Rote Hilfe. For a bank, such a sanction amounts to a death sentence.

GLS apparently responded to this pressure when it closed Rote Hilfe’s accounts, even though Rote Hilfe is not only a customer but also a member of the cooperatively organized bank and therefore enjoys special protection. GLS asked Rote Hilfe “about our connection to ‘Antifa Ost’ shortly before closing our accounts,” Hartmut Brückner from the federal executive committee of Rote Hilfe told *Junge Welt*. Rote Hilfe had campaigned for the release of the arrested anti-fascists and organized a solidarity campaign for them.

In a convoluted statement, GLS itself essentially admitted that it was responding to government pressure by closing the accounts. It apparently felt compelled to issue the statement because a storm of protest against the closures was developing among its members and customers.

GLS denies that the closures were “politically motivated” and hypocritically declared: “We share our community’s concern that spaces for democratic civil society are shrinking. Organizations and associations that identify with both the bourgeois and politically left-wing spectrum are increasingly being targeted or sabotaged.” However, it continues, “terminations are unfortunately part of a bank’s daily business.”

It justifies the terminations with the “increased due diligence” that the bank faces “when, for example, organizations collect donations or are monitored by the Verfassungsschutz.” It then has to “check every account movement.” “The risks, if something is wrong, are borne by both the bank and individual employees.” The bank has to weigh up: “What is a realistic amount of work? What is the risk for the bank as a whole and for individual employees?” That is why it has terminated the accounts of a few customers. “We are aware that this is a very hard blow for the organizations affected.”

The involvement of Verfassungsschutz

The reference to the BfV is particularly important. It makes it clear that the pressure on GLS is not only coming from the Trump administration, but also from the German domestic intelligence service, which denounces

and monitors both the DKP, Rote Hilfe and ABC as “left-wing extremist.”

DKP leader Klaus Leger has confirmed that the BfV is involved. In a telephone conversation, GLS itself admitted “that there was external pressure and that the termination was not based on a sovereign internal decision by GLS Bank,” he said in an interview with *NachDenkSeiten*. “When I asked whether the BfV had exerted influence, the GLS representatives did not want to go into detail, but they did not deny it either.”

It is also clear that the “Act to Improve Internal Security and the Asylum System,” which came into force on October 31, 2024, has drastically expanded the powers of the BfV in the financial sector. The secret service was already allowed to obtain information about bank accounts in cases of “extremist” and “anti-constitutional” activities, but only if the activities were inflammatory, violent or advocated violence. This restriction has now been removed.

This means that accounts belonging to individuals or organizations that behave in a completely lawful manner can also be monitored, which was the declared aim of the amendment to the law introduced by the then governing parties SPD, Greens and FDP. The official explanatory memorandum to the law explicitly stated that this would mean that “even legalistic activities with considerable potential for action or a significant social impact would be covered by the investigative powers.”

The evaluation of BfV reports is already common practice at banks and was described by the federal government in 2012, in response to a question about “account closures for so-called extremists,” as an “effective means” of monitoring business relationships.

In October 2024, a report titled “Extremists as Customers” appeared on public television, claiming that controversial organizations were too easily able to open bank accounts in Germany. “Expert” Thomas Seidel, a former employee of the Federal Criminal Police Office, said: “The least that can be demanded is that the banks read the BfV reports and use them as a basis for information within the scope of their due diligence obligations. And that would mean parting ways with these customers and accounts.”

The EU is also imposing sanctions

After Postbank closed the accounts of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei and Mehring Verlag, the WSWS warned:

German banks have long been trying to silence unpopular voices by closing their accounts. While this was initially directed primarily at organizations from the far-right, anti-establishment and coronavirus-denier spectrum, left-wing, socialist and pacifist organizations are now increasingly being targeted.

This warning has been confirmed. Cooperation between banks, police and secret services is being systematically expanded. And the German government has criticized neither Trump’s sanctions nor the current account closures.

Last but not least, the EU has failed to extend its Blocking Regulation, which protects European companies from the effects of extraterritorial US laws and sanctions and prohibits them from complying with these sanctions.

The US instruments that led to the listing of “Antifa Ost” (terror sanctions) are still not included in the annex to the regulation after six weeks. By way of comparison, when US President Trump unilaterally

terminated the nuclear agreement with Iran (JCPOA) during his first term in office and reactivated US sanctions, the EU Commission updated its 1996 regulation within less than a month.

The executive orders issued by Trump in 2025 against the International Criminal Court (ICC) are also still not included in the annex to the EU blocking regulation after 10 months. Due to investigations into Israel’s crimes in Gaza, at least nine ICC officials, including six judges, have been sanctioned by the US and lost access to their bank accounts, credit cards, PayPal and social networks.

The situation is even worse for individuals who have been sanctioned by the EU itself. The WSWS reported on the de facto professional ban for political reasons imposed on Berlin-based German journalist Hüseyin Do?ru, whose account was also frozen. Do?ru is not allowed to engage in paid work, nor is he allowed to receive economic support of any kind. In an interview on YouTube, he described the sadistic bureaucratic harassment from the EU and Germany he has been forced to endure—a nightmare straight out of a Franz Kafka novel. In the meantime, similar sanctions have been imposed on other individuals.



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