

Germany's culture minister cancels presentation of the Booksellers' Prize at the Leipzig Book Fair

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Following his attacks on the recently concluded Berlinale, the German government commissioner for culture and the media (BKM), Minister of State Wolfram Weimer, has set his sights on the book trade. This time Weimer's censorship measures involve removing three left-wing bookshops from a list of 118 shops compiled by an independent expert jury for the German Bookshop Award. This move has triggered a massive wave of protest and criticism.

In an introductory address for the Bookshop Prize, Weimer had boasted: "Through literature, we can have experiences that would otherwise be impossible for us ... That is why freedom of speech is one of the highest goods of our democratic society, which we must preserve and protect at all costs. Owner-run bookshops make an important contribution to this." His latest decision exposes his highflying rhetoric as perfidious hypocrisy.

Following the massive resistance to his decision, Weimer went further and cancelled the ceremonial presentation of the German Booksellers' Prize at the Leipzig Book Fair, which begins this week. A spokesperson for Weimer stated last Tuesday that the debate over his removal of the three left-wing bookshops would "increasingly overshadow" the book fair.

Only weeks ago, the minister of state had tried in vain to dismiss the director of the Berlinale and then imposed a code of conduct on her that allows the government to influence the selection of films and control the conduct of the management of the Berlinale. Weimer's actions in recent weeks constitute massive violations of the constitutional right to artistic freedom and freedom of expression.

His attack on the book trade is viewed by numerous figures from publishing houses, as well as by authors and booksellers, as an extremely threatening assault on democratic rights and has sparked a wide-ranging debate on the legality of such state intervention.

The Ministry awards annual prizes to support the work of small bookshops, which play an important role in the cultural sector but are increasingly facing competition from large cultural department stores, mass-market bookshops and online delivery services. Along with over 100 other bookshops, the three left-wing bookshops Golden Shop (Bremen), Rote Strasse (Göttingen) and Zur schwankenden Weltkugel (Berlin) were selected by a jury of experts for the Bookshop Award, which comes with financial incentives of up to €25,000. The last of these bookshops in

particular stocks a large selection of Trotskyist literature from Mehring Verlag.

"Haber procedure"

Weimer's ministry justified its ban on the bookshops with "constitutionally relevant findings," which, according to press reports, are based on the "Haber procedure." This procedure dates back to a decree from 2017 and enables government bodies to routinely review projects prior to funding decisions.

Since the mid-2000s, civil society projects combating right-wing extremism in the fields of political education and culture, amongst others, have been scrutinised by the German domestic intelligence agency (BfV) for "findings relevant to the protection of the constitution" prior to the approval of federal funding. Following intervention by the Ministry of the Interior, citing constitutional security assessments, organisations such as Berlin's "Bündnis Neukölln" and the "Edelweisspiratenfestival" were denied prize money from a federal-affiliated democracy alliance, despite the fact that their core work involves remembrance and cultural policy.

The cooperation between ministries and the BfV in the distribution of state funding originally dates back to an initiative by the then German minister of the interior, Otto Schily (Social Democratic Party, SPD), in 2004. The procedure is highly controversial from a legal perspective. The publishing agency PROLIT points out that it has been classified as a breach of data protection law by the government's Data Protection Commissioner. The Scientific Services of the Bundestag also expressed concerns regarding proportionality in 2020, and the Federal Constitutional Court ruled in 2022 that the BfV's disclosure of information to authorities such as the Ministry of Culture was inadmissible.

Legal opinions suggest that the mere possibility that classifications by the BfV could lead to the refusal of funding, inducing cultural workers to exercise caution and self-censorship.

In a kind of preemptive test of obedience, numerous projects in the federal states and local authorities have already fallen victim to

such vetting. In view of the need for austerity resulting from the reallocation of public funds towards military rearmament, this has evidently become a welcome practice. In Berlin, for instance, the former Senator for Culture, Joe Chialo (CDU), attempted—following the smear campaign against Documenta 15—to make cultural funding conditional on a commitment against antisemitism; however, he failed due to legal concerns.

This Haber procedure was also decisive in Weimer's decision. It is extremely opaque: the BfV merely states whether there are "findings" regarding an organisation—but not what these consist of.

The three bookshops, which had already been honoured in the past, were now excluded from the award ceremony on the basis of the mere notification from the BfV that "findings" regarding them were available. The "Schwankende Weltkugel" had previously received the award no less than five times.

Weimer's office stated: "The exact nature of this intelligence is subject to secrecy." It is therefore impossible for those affected to find out what it is being levelled against them. They only learned of the minister's decision by chance through a slip of the tongue and are now preparing a lawsuit.

Ideological snooping

Several regional associations of the German Publishers and Booksellers Association have raised the accusation of "ideological snooping." The Association stated: "The suspicion of 'extremist and terrorist organisations' remains highly questionable as long as no concrete evidence is disclosed."

In addition, they fundamentally reject making the recognition of a bookshop's cultural achievements dependent on the political orientation of its stock.

Numerous figures from the cultural sector have also protested. The writers' association PEN Germany stated that Weimer had "damaged the reputation of an entire industry." Bookshops, they said, are places of democratic exchange and diversity of opinion.

The writer Rafik Schami protested: "It is repugnant how, with such inimitably obstinate persistence, the floodgates are being opened to the far right." Author Saša Stanišić accused Weimer of "incompetence, arbitrariness and ideological interference in culture."

Many bookshops expressed solidarity with the three shops that had been dropped from the list and announced that they would donate part of their prize money to them.

The many outraged statements against the exclusion of the bookshops rightly regard this as a dangerous attack on democratic rights. The fact that the world of books is reacting so sensitively can also be understood against the backdrop of experiences from the Nazi era. After 1933, countless writers and intellectuals were forced to leave the country or were persecuted and imprisoned. Book burnings began in Germany as early as March 1933.

Most recently, a lawyer representing one of the bookshops revealed that Weimer is alleged to have actively misled the three excluded bookshops. According to a whistleblower, the jury had

even earmarked two of the bookshops for top prizes, yet the minister's office told them otherwise.

Weimer has stated: "Freedom of art and freedom of expression are the most important democratic achievements, which I will always defend." At the same time, he emphasised that prizes funded by taxpayers' money should only be awarded to institutions "that are above all suspicion."

Weimer's remarks are brimming with hypocrisy. Whilst left-wing bookshops are being targeted, the far-right AfD receives around €120 million annually from party funding and Bundestag funds.

It comes therefore as no surprise that Weimer's actions were expressly welcomed by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). The AfD's cultural affairs spokesperson, Götz Frömming, stated with satisfaction that Weimer had learned from his own party's "opposition work."

Weimer, who has declared himself to be an Independent, is a close confidant of Chancellor Friedrich Merz, and belongs politically to the far right. In his book *The Conservative Manifesto* he attacked "the German left," which he claimed wanted to replace traditional values with "equality, emancipation and solidarity." In his book *Longing for God*, he calls for a return to Christianity.

In articles and essays, he lamented Europe's "cultural self-destruction" through immigration and also questioned man-made climate change.

At the Berlinale, Weimer attacked artists who drew attention to the plight of the Palestinian people. For him, the problem is rather "millions of unemployed Muslims."

In many respects, Weimer's commitment to "Western Christian civilisation" mirrors the ideology of the Trump administration, as recently articulated by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the Munich Security Conference.

As early as 2022, the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) had warned of precisely such a development in its constitutional complaint against its surveillance by the BfV. At the time, the party stated: "Furthermore, booksellers who distribute Marxist literature, workers striking for higher wages, or peace activists could be criminalised at the stroke of a pen." The latest events show just how accurate this warning was.



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