

# Germany's ultra-right culture minister Weimer continues his rampage against freedom of art and expression

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Germany's Minister of State for Culture Wolfram Weimer is pursuing his rampage against freedom of art and expression. The Office of the Commissioner for Culture and Media (BKM) has announced a new measure to sharply intensify censorship. According to Weimer's instructions, all members of juries in the field of cultural funding are to be recorded in lists to be handed over to the government.

The proposal was reported by *Der Spiegel* magazine, which has obtained relevant internal email correspondence. The lists are to be submitted to the ministry within three days for "informational" purposes. They are to be "shareable" (for example, with Germany's intelligence agency, the Verfassungsschutz?), "as significant political pressure is building here." The ministry stated that this was intended to provide an overview of numerous jury-based procedures and explain them "in the parliamentary arena" if necessary.

Apparently, this measure is intended to enable a comprehensive review of juries by the Verfassungsschutz using the controversial Haber method, in order to purge juries in a timely manner before they decide on cultural funding measures that do not align with Germany's "national interest." Such a selection of juries would, under certain circumstances, make it unnecessary to reverse awards, scholarships or funding decisions after they have been made—with the involvement of the Verfassungsschutz—as was recently the case with the German Bookstore Prize.

Since Weimer's censorship measures in regard to the Berlinale and the Bookstore Prize, calls for his resignation or dismissal have been mounting. In the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Claudius Seidel justifies such calls by arguing that Weimer is not up to the task, because he understands too little about culture or is simply overwhelmed. In fact, Weimer's course is in alignment with the reactionary, anti-democratic concept the ruling CDU/SPD government (a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union CDU, Christian Social Union CSU and Social Democratic Party SPD) has assigned to cultural policy.

Chancellor Friedrich Merz has confirmed this. Weimer's actions meet with "broad approval" not only from him but also "across the entire cultural and media sector," though "not from everyone and not at all times," Merz claimed. Weimer is fulfilling the task for which he was appointed, i.e., enforcing a backward-looking policy and eradicating left-wing tendencies in the cultural sector.

The sanctioned bookstores are now suing Weimer. The Berlin bookstore *Zur schwankenden Weltkugel* has filed an urgent motion with the Administrative Court, its attorney Jasper Prigge announced. The culture minister is to be prohibited from publicly labelling the bookstore and its staff as political extremists. In an interview with *Die Zeit*, Weimer had said: "If the state awards prizes and uses taxpayer money, it cannot do so for political extremists."

## Attack on Berlin's cultural funding

The latest attack by Weimer's agency is directed against the Capital Cultural Fund (HKF), which includes two representatives each from Weimer's ministry and the Berlin Senate Department for Culture. The HKF is a program funded by the federal government with €15 million [US\$17.3 million] annually to promote art and culture in Berlin.

Here, too, Weimer's agency intervened in the jury's decision, which had intended to award €30,000 to a project for the translation of significant 20th-century Palestinian authors. The jury had selected this project—along with 75 others—from a total of 400 submissions. Of all the projects, this specific one—proposed by translator and literary scholar Miriam Rainer—was struck from the list, despite being not a political action program, but a purely literary endeavor.

The translation proposal was endorsed by the Cultural Fund's curator, Leonie Baumann, the former rector of the Weissensee Academy of Art. The project focused on three Palestinian authors who have long since passed away: Samira Azzam, Ghassan Kanafani and Mahmoud Darwish. In response to an inquiry from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, a spokesperson for Weimer asserted the jury's selection of projects was merely a recommendation. These recommendations were "not binding on the Joint Committee." However, until now, the committee had always followed the jury's recommendations.

The jury members viewed the move as "intimidation." "Independent juries are not a symbolic accessory in public cultural funding, but rather an institutional safeguard for artistic freedom," they explained. The juries assured that "decisions are made based on professional diversity, collective responsibility, and with distance from partisan political expediency." If their decisions were compromised, this would "permanently damage trust in the integrity of cultural funding."

The reasons for the project's "postponement" were not passed on to its initiator. A spokesperson for the Berlin Senate Department of Culture stated that the funding had been "placed on hold" to "clarify open questions." What these questions entailed was not explained. Rainer rejected suggestions to the initiator that she modify the project by pairing Palestinian texts with Israeli ones and withdrew her application. Her concern, she noted, was precisely the lack of translations of Palestinian literature.

Another of Weimer's recent actions has also caused outrage. He intends to halt the planned expansion of the German National Library in Leipzig. The National Library is the country's central archival library and national bibliographic centre. It is legally obligated to store, preserve and protect all German and German-language publications—both in print and digitally—with the support of the federal government.

The planned storage facility at Deutscher Platz in Leipzig was intended to serve the long-term archiving of the National Library's holdings. Designed as a highly functional and climate-controlled repository, it was intended to ensure the secure storage of approximately 35.5 million media works for about 30 years.

Weimer justified halting the project by arguing that the collection of physical media works was no longer appropriate for the foreseeable future; the National Library should focus more on its digital collection.

Following fierce criticism from, among others, the German Publishers and Booksellers Association and library circles, he initially backtracked and explained that the final review of the planning documents by the federal building authority was still pending and that long-term financing had not been secured.

## Buchenwald Memorial

While the legal battle surrounding the Bookstore Prize and the debate over the National Library were still ongoing, a new front opened up for the Minister of State: the Buchenwald Concentration Camp Memorial.

Two Buchenwald associations have issued an open letter calling on Weimer to refrain from appearing at the commemoration of the liberation of the concentration camp on April 12. The letter was signed by the chairpersons of the Buchenwald-Dora Camp Working Group and the Buchenwald Camp Community, Katinka Poensgen and Horst Gobrecht.

The letter accuses Weimer of failing to engage positively with the legacy of the survivors of Buchenwald and other camps. Among other things, it cites Weimer's repeated misuse of a quote by Heinrich Heine as evidence of his lack of understanding.

The famous Jewish-born German writer Heine (1797–1856) had allowed himself to be baptized as a Lutheran so he could practice law after passing his bar exam, which was forbidden for Jews at the time. He commented on this with the words: "The baptismal certificate is the ticket to European culture." As is well known, Heine abandoned this plan, chose the profession of a writer (becoming a friend of Karl Marx in the process) and later regretted having been baptized.

Weimer, however, turns Heine's scathing indictment of the oppression and exclusion of Jews upside down, claiming that Christianity, the "baptismal certificate," is the true and sole foundation of European culture.

As early as 2013, he took up arms against the alleged cultural decline of Europe with the Heine (mis)quote in the magazine *Schweizer Monat*. Europe was becoming "increasingly silent in the realm of ethical cultural forms"; with this religious masochism, Europe was killing "its cultural primal force," he wrote at the time. Weimer makes a similar argument in his "Conservative Manifesto." In it, he laments that Christianity has been "relativized, fought against, and ultimately abandoned" for "several centuries"—which he claims is leading to Europe's decline.

The open letter from the Buchenwald associations states that Weimer's interpretation of the Heine quote means "for many of the former prisoners of the Buchenwald camp—and also for us as descendants and political successors of survivors—that, from their perspective, we do not belong to the realm of European culture."

The "International Committee of Buchenwald, Dora, and Commando Camps" had already criticized Weimer's censorship of the bookstore award in a press release: "The public stigmatization of bookstores or publishers by government agencies ... is reminiscent of traditions of exclusion and cultural control, the consequences of which were devastating."

Weimer, however, is sticking to his appearance in Buchenwald. He has

received backing from the director of the Buchenwald Memorial, Jens-Christian Wagner; the president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Josef Schuster; Thuringian Minister of Education Christian Tischner (CDU); and the Federal Government Commissioner for Antisemitism, Felix Klein.

Wagner stated that Weimer, "by participating in the commemorative event marking the 81st anniversary of the liberation of the camp in Buchenwald, is sending an important signal of support for our work." Klein criticizes the associations for allegedly "mixing aspects of current politics with the fundamental concerns of remembrance culture in a manner worthy of criticism." What purpose does a culture of remembrance serve, if not to draw lessons for the present?

Weimer holds a conservative-neoliberal worldview and is well-established and well-connected in those circles. He worked as a journalist for newspapers and magazines on the right and served as editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Die Welt*, the *Berliner Morgenpost*, *Focus*, the magazine *Cicero* (which he founded), and finally the magazine *The European*. He was never responsible for culture in these roles.

His books, in which he advocates a return to homeland, family and faith, attest to his mindset, which borders on a "blood and soil" ideology. In *The Conservative Manifesto—Ten Commandments of the New Bourgeoisie*, for example, he writes: "While generation after generation, for millennia, has taken for granted the continuity of one's own family, one's own blood, the clan, the tribe, the nation, the culture, and civilization as a sacred moment of life, this consciousness is suddenly shattering into pieces."

Weimer also laments the lack of "spatial expansion" of Europe after 1945—ultimately, the loss of colonies (or perhaps "living space in the East"?). A thesis he applies in practice today by deeming colonialism projects unworthy of funding.

Like numerous far-right politicians, starting with Donald Trump, Weimer unabashedly links his political office to business and personal enrichment.

At the beginning of his term, he came under criticism for his involvement in the Weimer Media Group, which he had founded in 2012. He has since transferred his shares to a trustee. The company is now run by his wife, and Weimer himself likely continues to benefit from its revenues.

The Weimer Media Group's business model is based on brokering contacts with political decision-makers for large sums of money. For instance, it organizes the Ludwig Ehrhard Summit every year at Gut Kaltenbrunn on Lake Tegernsee and awards the "Media Freedom Prize" there. Participation comes at a cost: €1,000 to €3,000 for regular attendees, and between €20,000 and €100,000 for partner companies to participate in panel discussions.

For these hefty sums, participants gain exclusive access to high-ranking politicians or other prominent figures who can advance their careers or economic success.

Politically, Weimer's views certainly overlap with those of the far-right Alternative for Germany, AfD. For instance, he has criticized what he considers Germany's overly lax migration and integration policies as "a form of reparations through cultural self-destruction." He referred to the basic income security benefits as "migrant money." He has also cast doubt on whether climate change is manmade and railed against "compulsory fees" for public broadcasting.



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