

# German government's 2025 cultural budget: An attack on the freedom of art

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The draft federal budget for 2025 provides for a slight increase from €2.15 billion to €2.2 billion for the Federal Fund for Culture and Media (BKM). But appearances are deceptive.

While selected areas—including the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, German filmmaking and the broadcaster Deutsche Welle—are to receive more money, the six federal funds that support the independent cultural scene will lose around half of their budget: €14 billion.

These six funds primarily support non-commercial projects. The spectrum ranges from artistic experiments in a laboratory setting to youth work. They award scholarships; organise literature, theatre, jazz and dance festivals; and offer prizes, for example, for high-quality literary translations.

Last year, the *Fonds Soziokultur* awarded prizes to projects designed to promote young people's engagement with other cultures, solidarity with refugees and sensitivity to socially disadvantaged fellow human beings. According to Reiner Pöll of the *Musikfonds*, which was only founded in 2016, by 2023 only 7.2 percent of music projects worthy of funding could be considered. "There is not enough money for the large number of applications," he said.

A petition launched by artists in the independent scene, which quickly received over 36,000 signatures, points out that the "Alliance of International Production Houses, an extremely successful cultural model and association of the largest independent international production houses for many years ... has had all federal funding cut in the 10th year of its existence." The performing arts are particularly affected, "because with the loss of the Alliance of International Production Houses and the cutbacks in the Performing Arts Fund, a total of 10 billion euros less is available for the scene."

The cuts particularly affect cultural areas that "reach a diverse audience of millions with their work," the petition states. And further: "In times of increasing social polarisation and growing anti-democratic forces, the liberal arts need to be strengthened, aesthetically and culturally standing for the freedom of the arts and against any form of group-related hostility."

One example of an acutely endangered project is HELLERAU – European Centre for the Arts Dresden. It belongs to the "Alliance of International Production Houses" and looks back on a long history since its foundation in 1911 as a centre of artistic modernism. It is today known for its diverse international collaborations and connections in theatre, music and dance.

Among its current guests is the Japanese EIZO Theatre. The announced cancellation of federal funding "comes at a time," as artistic director Carena Schlewitt told the online magazine VAN, "when international encounters and understanding are more important than ever."

The budget cut came as a surprise to the associations. It was only in July, after years of discussion, that minimum fees for freelance cultural workers were set, at least for projects that are financed or partially financed by the Federal Ministry of Culture. However, implementing this would require an increase in the budget. The fact that up to 50 percent of the funds have been cut instead means that numerous projects will have to close. The situation is exacerbated by the announcement of the federal states, including Berlin, that they will also make drastic cuts in their cultural budgets.

## Culture as state propaganda

The federal government's budget decision must be seen as a targeted political action in relation to cultural life. The fact that, in parallel with the drastic cuts in independent cultural projects, some prominent areas are to be financially strengthened serves to further integrate art and culture into foreign policy and government propaganda.

As for the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, with its numerous renowned museums in Berlin, it is one of the cultural beacons with which the German state is trying to shine internationally. The foundation's president, Hermann Parzinger, has enthusiastically welcomed the budget increase. However, museum visitors and employees should be warned. In the face of war and social crisis, the government will increase its political pressure.

Museums are already being urged to organise pro-Ukrainian events and to prevent pro-Palestinian protests. At the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum, which belongs to the National Museums and thus to the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, a Hannah Arendt reading in February was interrupted by participants protesting against the war in Gaza. The media subsequently raged about their alleged "antisemitism," demanded more police protection in the future and criticized the museum management,

which had allowed the group to participate.

Hand in hand with the new cultural budget, the federal government is planning an “antisemitism” clause for cultural and scientific projects, which is tantamount to the introduction of censorship. Berlin had previously tried to establish such a clause.

On July 1, the German Cultural Council warned that this would mean cultural institutions were “no longer perceived as fundamentally open places” and that “the constitutionally enshrined freedom of art” would be restricted. It wrote that “Efforts to introduce clauses into the federal budget code or into the budget codes of the federal states” could lead to “a regular review of applicants by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution,” as the domestic intelligence service is called.

Even the increased budget for film does not really serve to promote cinematic art. It is primarily intended to boost the film industry’s profits. The German film industry is to be promoted in order, as Minister of State for Culture Claudia Roth (Green Party) explained, to “make it more competitive again as an area of the creative industries. This will help to attract film productions to Germany and keep productions here.”

In doing so, she is following the demands of the German film industry. In an urgent appeal, the industry’s four largest film studios—Bavaria, Babelsberg, MMC and Penzing Studios—called on the federal government to take action before the summer break, as Germany “would otherwise be left behind more and more,” according to *Blickpunkt:Film*.

International interest in Germany as a film production location has declined in recent years. Productions, including those from Hollywood, are increasingly being relocated to Eastern Europe due to the lower costs. The German Oscar-winning film of 2023, “All Quiet on the Western Front,” was produced in the Czech Republic. At least 30 international film and series projects have been shot in Eastern Europe instead of Germany in the last five years, complains Andy Weltman, CEO of Studio Babelsberg.

“Modern film funding” should strengthen “cultural film,” said culture minister Roth, glossing over her budget decision. This is welcomed by some producers and directors insofar as the chaotically fragmented film funding is to be centralised. At the same time, planned automated funding processes have met with criticism. “However, high revenues and large audiences cannot be the sole claim of the German film industry; film is also a cultural asset,” is how Helmut Hartung, editor-in-chief of *medienpolitik.net*, critically sums up the film reform as a whole.

The character of the 2025 cultural budget is most clearly illustrated by the funding decision for broadcaster Deutsche Welle. While public radio and television stations are laying off staff and cutting or reducing cultural programmes to the level of private broadcasters, the government wants to strengthen the multilingual foreign broadcaster. Roth justifies this decision by saying that it is intended to counter “disinformation”—or, more precisely, to spread government propaganda.

Deutsche Welle has played an important role in the Cold War since 1953. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the radio station, which has also had a TV channel since 1992, spread illusions of democracy in the capitalist market economy, EU expansion and NATO in the successor states.

Unlike public broadcasters ARD, Deutschlandradio and ZDF, Deutsche Welle, which is financed from tax revenues and not from broadcast fees, is directly subordinate to the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and thus to the government.

The extent to which this broadcaster—officially advertised as the “media voice of Germany”—serves as a government and NATO propaganda organ today is underlined by the presentation of this year’s “Freedom of Speech Award” to Yulia Navalnaya, the widow of the recently deceased, right-wing extremist Russian politician Alexey Navalny.

In its “Ukraine fact check,” Deutsche Welle drums up support for the right-wing Ukrainian regime and tirelessly argues against anyone who even slightly criticises Prime Minister Zelensky for rejecting a peace agreement.

The rigorous curtailment of the independent cultural scene by Green Party politician Roth is a state attack on the freedom of art. As evidenced by the unequal distribution of funds, art and culture are to be adapted to the interests of the German economy and great power politics.

Last year, the federal government interfered massively in the Berlin Film Festival and misused it to promote its aggressive policy towards Ukraine. Zelensky spoke via video right at the beginning, and Claudia Roth’s speech was also influenced by this.

This year, Roth criticised protests against the attendance of parliamentary deputies from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) at the opening of the Berlinale (Berlin International Film Festival) as disregard of the “will of the voters,” and warned that the festival received state funding.

In the end, a political storm of indignation raged in the media against the Berlinale management because it had allowed declarations of solidarity with the Palestinians at the award ceremony for the film “No Other Land.”

The planned reduction of the already small budget for independent art is a right-wing cultural policy and grist to the mill of the AfD. This fascist party has long been engaged in nationalist cultural agitation, attacking modern art in a way reminiscent of the Nazis’ vilification of “degenerate art.” It seeks to cut everything that does not promote a “positive image of Germany.”

As in the dark past of the country under Hitler, the ruling political class is trying to put a stop to internationally oriented, socially critical and forward-looking art. The social regression that is currently escalating in all areas is bound up with cultural regression.



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