German president calls for clampdown on freedom of speech, internet censorship at Berlin conference

By Johannes Stern
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Ahead of the European elections on May 26, the ruling class intends to intensify internet censorship and silence critical viewpoints. This was plain for all to see in the speech given by German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to open the re:publica 2019 conference in Berlin last week.

With cynical references to Germany's Basic Law and the right to freedom of speech contained within it, Steinmeier called for new censorship measures and appealed to the major technology firms to enforce already existing guidelines more aggressively.

He stated, "The upcoming 70th anniversary of the German Basic Law reminds us of a connection that pre-dates online and offline: liberty needs rules—and new liberties need new rules. Furthermore, freedom of opinion brings with it responsibility for opinion." He stressed that he knew "there are already many rules," among which he mentioned the notorious Network Enforcement Law (Netz DG), but it will be necessary to "argue over others."

He then added, "Anyone who creates space for a political discussion with a platform bears responsibility for democracy, whether they like it or not." Therefore, democratic regulations are required, he continued. Steinmeier said that he felt this is now understood in Silicon Valley. "After a lot of words and announcements, discussion forums, and photogenic appearances with politicians," it is now time "for Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Co. to finally acknowledge their responsibility for democracy, finally put it into practice."

Steinmeier's understanding of freedom and democracy underscores the kind of authoritarian spirit that predominates in the ruling elite 74 years after the downfall of the Third Reich. For Germany's head of state, freedom of opinion is not a human right anchored in the Basic Law as a fundamental right in opposition to state power. For Steinmeier, who is speaking for the entire ruling class, political positions are only deemed to be "responsible" or "democratic" if they are in line with those of the established parties and mainstream media outlets. Positions that deviate from this must be "regulated," i.e., censored and suppressed.

This applies, for example, to the issue of transparency. "As long as the quick lie and the serious news item, the confirmed fact and the pure opinion, as long as reason and agitation appear undifferentiated alongside each other in news feeds, demagogues will certainly have an easy time," railed Steinmeier. It is "necessary to have crystal clear labels of origin for information, above all when political advertising is involved! Anyone who deliberately places political messages tailored to data must be forced by the operator and possibly even lawmakers to show their face."

Steinmeier was not more specific about what he meant by agitation and unserious news, or the political messages and advertising he wants to control. But it is obvious what he is talking about.

Five years ago, when he was foreign minister, Steinmeier banned any criticism of Germany's militarist foreign policy in the lead-up to the 2014 European elections. When a few protesters described him as a warmonger at the SPD's central rally at Alexanderplatz in Berlin for his role in the right-wing coup in Ukraine and the NATO offensive against Russia, he insulted them as "thugs" who wanted to damage Europe, and yelled at them, "You have no right."

Since then, the ruling elite has intensified its policies of military rearmament and the social spending cuts required to pay for it, while working feverishly to suppress the widespread opposition among workers and young people.

In the name of the struggle against "hate speech," "fake news" and "disinformation" on the internet, left-wing and progressive websites and opinions have been the main target for censorship.

Facebook has repeatedly blocked accounts that criticise war or police violence. In Germany, thousands of posts have been deleted under the same pretext since the coming into force of the Network Enforcement Law. And after extensive consultations with German government officials, Google is censoring the *World Socialist Web Site* .

The current Secret Service report commissioned by the grand coalition also resorts to the use of terms like "disinformation" to criminalise left-wing opposition to official politics. In the section "propaganda and disinformation," it states, "Television, radio and internet channels broadcasting around the world are conducting propaganda and disinformation campaigns." In another part of the report, the intelligence agency boasts that "preventative measures" led to "increased attention to potential disinformation and stronger protective measures."

The declared goal of the Secret Service, which cooperates closely with the far-right Alternative for Germany, is the persecution of socialists. One example of this is the Secret Service report's reference to the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) for the first time as a left-wing extremist party and an object of observation. The only reason given by the report for this is the SGP's political opposition to "the existing state and social order invariably slandered as 'capitalism,' against the EU, supposed nationalism, imperialism and militarism, as well as against Social Democracy, the trade unions, and the Left Party."

Current developments increasingly resemble the darkest period of European history. For over a month, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has been confined to the high security Belmarsh prison in London with the silent approval of the German government. His only "crime" is that WikiLeaks exposed the war crimes of US imperialism and its European allies. For this, he now faces the threat of being extradited to the United States and possibly the death penalty.

The SGP refuses to be intimidated by these developments. The party is taking legal action against the Secret Service report, and organising meetings and a central rally to demand the freedom of Assange.

The SGP views Steinmeier's speech as a declaration of war. Already last autumn, Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) threatened parties with sanctions if they failed to stick to the prescribed political line during the European election campaign. Steinmeier now warns, "It is comparatively small groups who are making a disproportionately loud noise. … Don't give up online political spaces to the raging paper tigers!"

The reason for the German president's hysterical outburst is not hard to understand. The ruling class fears that the SGP's socialist programme will find mass support. Already in 2016, a Yougov survey found that more people in Germany have a positive view of socialism than capitalism. The working class has radicalised further since then.

Over recent months, hundreds of thousands have protested against the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the government's right-wing policies, new police powers, and internet censorship, and for the expropriation of major hedge funds and property owners. In February, tens of thousands joined public sector strikes against terrible working conditions and low pay. In March, thousands of transport workers went on strike in Berlin and shut down the city. Strikes and protests are on the rise throughout Europe and internationally.

The SGP and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International provide the sentiments driving these struggles with a clear political perspective and orientation. We call upon everyone who wants to fight the return of German militarism, the rise of poverty and the far-right, and the growing danger of a third world war to support our election campaign and take the conscious decision to join the SGP and take up the fight for socialism.

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