

German education minister scandal highlights tense, restrictive climate around Gaza

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Germany's liberal education minister Bettina Stark-Watzinger has struggled to shake off calls to step down after an internal inquiry about cutting funding to academics based on their political positions went public. The ongoing scandal is illustrative of Germany's uniquely restrictive approach to Israel and the war in Gaza.



German Education Minister Bettina Stark-Watzinger, of the liberal Free Democrats, speaks at a public event in Berlin on May 28, 2024. (re:publica/Wikimedia Commons)

BERLIN (CN) — Minister of education isn't the flashiest position in Germany's cabinet. It's typically a fairly anonymous role to those not involved in academia or the country's education system.

Education minister Bettina Stark-Watzinger, of the liberal Free Democrats, has achieved a widespread resonance rarely associated with her station. Unfortunately for her, it's because she's embroiled in a scandal and is contending with an ever-growing chorus of calls for her to resign.

"She has been practically absent for crucial debates about several serious problems in German academia, where she was actually needed, and emerges as a central figure when it comes to policing researchers' political opinions. This is very unfortunate," Asli Vatansever, a labor sociologist in Berlin, told Courthouse News.

Vatansever is a member of the Network for Decent Labour in Academia, a Germany-wide band of initiatives advocating for better working conditions at universities and research institutions.

The network has called for Stark-Watzinger's resignation — a demand echoed by more than [3,000 academics](#) who said German academics are experiencing an unprecedented attack on their fundamental rights.

The seeds of the scandal were sown in an early May pro-Palestinian protest at Berlin's Free University. Germany has taken a [hard line toward pro-Palestinian demonstrations](#), and the roughly 150 students involved were cleared out by police nearly instantly.

Hundreds of Berlin-based academics responded with an [open letter](#) criticizing the eviction. “Regardless of whether we agree with the specific demands of the protest camps, we support our students and their right to peaceful protest, which also includes the occupation of university grounds,” they wrote.

Stark-Watzinger was deeply critical of the letter, saying she was “bewildered” by it and claiming its signatories were tolerating antisemitism by supporting the protests.

Markus Kienscherf, a sociologist at Free University’s JFK Institute of North American Studies and one of the letter’s signatories, said the explosive response was flabbergasting.

“Though nobody ever specified what exactly happened at the protests that could be considered antisemitic, the subtext was sort of that by signing the letter, we had somehow facilitated antisemitic word and deeds. This really made me feel awful,” he told Courthouse News.

He underscored that the academics focused not on the protesters’ stance, but on their right to take it.

“I think that’s kind of the key distinction here that also kind of got lost afterwards: a distinction between a right to protest and the contents and the goals of a protest,” Kienscherf said.

Leaked [documents](#) revealed that the Education Ministry pursued a legal review to determine if it would be possible to withdraw public funding from academics who signed the letter, and even to assess whether any elements of the letter may have been criminal acts, German public broadcaster NDR reported in June.

Stark-Watzinger claims she wasn’t aware of the demand for the legal review. State Secretary for Education Sabine Döring was deemed responsible and fired. But this did little to damper the scandal: Döring is suing the Education Ministry, and ongoing pressure from media, academics and politicians indicate that many still hold Stark-Watzinger personally accountable.

“If you claim to be ‘bewildered’ by this open letter, then an order for a legal review isn’t neutral and open to a variety of outcomes,” Christian Pestalozza, a constitutional law expert and law professor at Berlin’s Free University, told Courthouse News.

“Instead,” he continued, “the letter had been critiqued, and this is an opportunity to see if further consequences for it can be implemented. The review would likely be directed towards a certain outcome from the start.”

The law doesn’t necessarily dictate that Stark-Watzinger has to resign, Pestalozza said, making the scandal a political, rather than legal, matter. In the end, he said, the decision falls to chancellor Olaf Scholz.

For Bard College Berlin’s Vatansever, potentially pulling funding based on an academic’s politics crossed the line.

“This is clearly at odds with the principle of academic freedom, by any definition of the word,” she said.



A protester holds up a handmade sign at pro-Palestine demonstration in Berlin on October 21, 2023. (Montacruz Foto/Wikimedia Commons)

Germany's academics aren't only under pressure from the state. Shortly after the Berlin professors released their letter supporting their students' right to protest, conservative tabloid Bild— where Stark-Watzinger initially criticized the letter-signers — released a front-page spread calling the signatories “perpetrators” and printing many of their pictures.

Vatansever is Turkish and worked in that country earlier in her career. She was dismissed from her position as a professor and banned from public service after signing Turkey's [Academics for Peace petition](#) eight years ago.

She was also among the signers called out in Bild.

“It brought back memories from the immediate aftermath of the Peace Petition I had signed in Turkey back in 2016, when newspapers supporting [President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan] published our names as traitors,” she said. “I was like, ‘Oh my god, I’m going through the same crap all over again. Where will I go in exile now?’”

Mass outrage and concern for the future among academics and an embattled education minister being propelled to national notoriety highlight the deeply tense climate in Germany. The country's stringent approach to pro-Palestinian protest and speech generally is tied to the German state's special relationship to Israel.

Germany considers Israel's security it's “[reason of state](#)” due to Germany's historical responsibility for the Holocaust. This is frequently borne out by interpreting criticism of Israel or Israeli policy as antisemitic in and of itself — a stance that has hardened during the war in Gaza, shaping the wider discourse as well as the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable on campus.

Kienscherf, of Free University's JFK Institute, argues the broad use of the term antisemitism and its instrumentalization in order to chill dissent have made fighting true antisemitism more difficult.

“One of the most tragic consequences of all this is that this very important term, as well as the overall struggle against antisemitism, has really kind of lost its bite,” he said.

At universities, this has extended beyond the swift clearance of anti-war protest camps due to pro-Palestinian messages and imagery: American philosopher Nancy Fraser, who is Jewish, had a job offer for a professorship at the [University of Cologne rescinded](#) after expressing solidarity with Palestinians.

Kienscherf is concerned that the restrictions on academic freedom may not be limited to Israel and Palestine.

“I'm afraid there is a kind of larger culture war-type onslaught on academia,” he said. “There's been an attack on left-wing academia, and this sort of follows the playbook of what we saw in the U.S.,

especially in states like Florida and the debate around critical race studies.”

Off campus, this hasn't just led to [widespread condemnation](#) of public figures seen as too critical of Israel or [shuttering of cultural centers](#) for hosting events deemed overly critical; Germany's relationship to Israel has become a vital pillar of how it relates to immigrants.

The eastern state of [Saxony-Anhalt](#) now requires anyone applying for German citizenship within the state to [recognize the state of Israel's](#) right to exist. Social media activity deemed as “glorifying terrorism” — which could be relevant if the state chooses to equate any form of solidarity with Palestine or criticism of Israel with supporting Hamas' terror — will now be [grounds for deportation](#).

Germany's wrestling with its historic responsibility for the Holocaust — particularly as the [far right continues to gain ground](#) — has brought international acclaim. But many academics argue that the current narrow focus on Israel severely limits speech at a critical moment.

“It is a very sensitive topic in Germany,” Vatansever said. “But then again, do the limits of academic freedom not become explicitly visible when it comes to talking about and researching sensitive topics? Academic freedom is the freedom to tackle sensitive topics.”

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