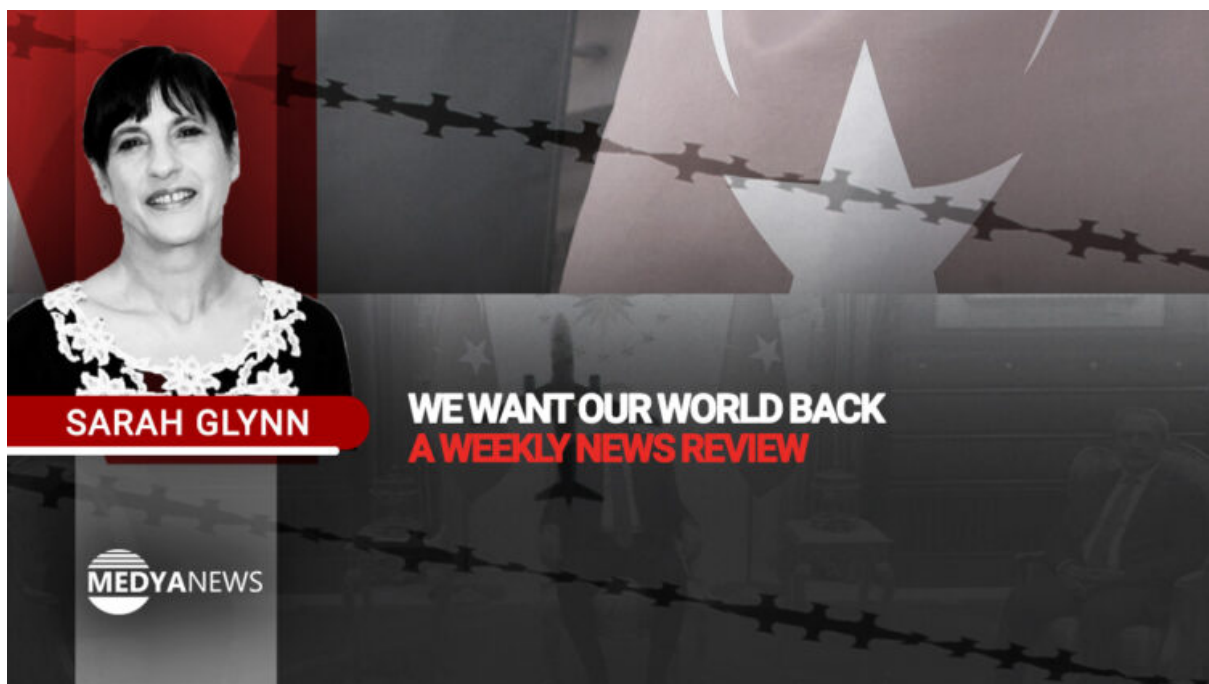


We want our world back – a weekly news review

Germany's history is supposed to have made German society sensitive to repression of minority groups and of freedom of speech, but only, it seems, for some groups and some ideas. Germany has a long record of repressing its Kurdish community – much the largest Kurdish community outside Kurdistan. They also attempt to silence Palestinian voices and even voices of Jews critical of Israel, demonstrating a failure to embrace the real meaning of "never again", which has to apply to all peoples.

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Sarah Glynn

Last week I began my review with the growing authoritarianism in Europe, and ended it with the hope of this weekend's [Challenging Capitalist Modernity conference](#) in Hamburg. I didn't know that just a few days earlier, German

authoritarianism – via Hamburg University, whose student association has been organising the conference together with the International Initiative Freedom for Öcalan – had informed the organisers that their long-established room bookings had been cancelled. Capitalist Modernity must not to be challenged, and especially not by people who support the Kurdish Freedom Movement and are interested in the philosophy of the imprisoned Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan. As explained by the General Students' Committee, "The President of the University, Prof. Dr. Hauke Heekeren, has decided not to make the premises available after having received a non-public letter from the Büro für Verfassungsschutz Hamburg, the Hamburg state agency responsible for domestic intelligence, accusing the conference of political extremism."

The university has refused requests from the student association to discuss this attack on their conference and on academic freedom, and the organisers have arranged to transfer the whole conference, of 1,300 people, across Hamburg to the Wilhelmsburg Bürgerhaus. Kurds are used to having their arrangements derailed and having to reconstruct their plans; but the university's actions have served to underline the necessity of the demand made in the conference title, "We want our world back".

Within days, the students had amassed a long international list of signatories for a public statement in defence of the conference, including many academics, and they will be pursuing the issues raised through legal action and through the university's own Academic Senate. The [statement](#) observes, "This scandalous action has enormous implications as a precedent: Nothing less than the freedom of science is at stake." And it asks "Will it be possible to host critical scientific events challenging the status quo at the University of Hamburg in the future? Is only research and teaching that accepts the social status quo still desirable?"

Prof Norman Paech, who was professor of public law at the University from 1982 to 2005, is a speaker at the conference and also spoke at two of the previous three conferences organised by the same people. He [told](#) Firat News Agency, "Contrary to the claims of the intelligence service and the rector, the PKK did not make any propaganda at the conference. In addition, solutions were offered for the major problems of our world, especially the Kurdish

question at these conferences. It seems that the discussions held in these conference series frightened some people and thus the university administration felt pressure to ban it.” And he called on the German authorities to “Stop looking at the Kurdish people and Kurdish organisations with suspicion.”

Germany and the Kurds

Germany’s history is supposed to have made German society sensitive to repression of minority groups and of freedom of speech, but only, it seems, for some groups and some ideas. Germany has a long record of repressing its Kurdish community – much the largest Kurdish community outside Kurdistan. They also attempt to silence Palestinian voices and even voices of Jews critical of Israel, demonstrating a failure to embrace the real meaning of “never again”, which has to apply to all peoples.

As in financial matters, Germany’s size and dominance ensure that it has a big influence on European Union policy and perspectives, too, though other western countries also support Turkey’s anti-Kurd agenda in their own interests. That nations have neither eternal allies nor perpetual enemies, only interests, was acknowledged long ago, by Lord Palmerston.

Turkey’s strategic geography ensures that its NATO partners do not want to risk annoying the Turkish government, which has proved adept at playing NATO off against Russia. And, since 2016, when the European Union effectively subcontracted to Turkey responsibility for millions of Syrian refugees, Turkey has acquired another source of leverage over the European nations. If the Turkish government is unhappy about a European decision, they threaten to open the borders and push the refugees into the EU. Angela Merkel played a major role in securing this deal, after backlash against her earlier welcoming of refugees to Germany almost lost her the German Chancellorship. Turkey is also an important trading partner for Germany, and German goods exported to Turkey include weapons and other items that can be used in weapon manufacture. Furthermore, Germany’s Turkish immigrants far outnumber Kurdish immigrants, so count for many more votes.

In a politics guided by German (or German elite) interests, Kurds have little weight. Quite how little is demonstrated by an [article](#) on the opportunities and limitations of the Turkish opposition, published in February by the influential German Institute for International and Security Affairs, which doesn't once mention the Kurds.

Sadly, the experience of the conference organisers is far from an anomaly. Dastan Jain has [observed](#) that military and economic links between Turkey and Germany go back to the 1880s, and that, in the Cold War years, Germany helped Turkey to put down leftist and pro-Kurdish struggles both within the immigrant community and within Turkey itself. Any hope for a major change of approach with the new government that was sworn in at the end of 2021 was short-lived. The social democrat/Green/Liberal coalition, with its so-called "feminist foreign policy", has proved just as careful of establishment interests as its predecessor.

To give a sense of what this means in practice, I have sifted through Firat News Agency's reports on Germany for the last year. While each story is shocking in itself, together they provide a stark representation of German complicity in Kurdish oppression. Similar things take place in other countries too, but in Germany the oppression is often worse.

Last year, parliamentary questions [revealed](#) how information about Kurdish activities and activists is collected by the German government and passed on to the Turkish authorities. A 1966 law requires all associations with a majority of foreign members to submit details of their directors to the government, and, since 1994, the information on Kurdish associations has been passed on to the intelligence services. When asked, the parliament's own Scientific Services Office declared this illegal. And the government has admitted – without mentioning Turkey – that information on the foreign associations was shared with foreign intelligence services. Further parliamentary questions [revealed](#) that the German Government forwards all convictions of Turkish citizens in Germany to the Turkish government. Many of these concern violations of the law of associations under the PKK ban. This practice can be assumed to contribute to the number of Kurds arrested when they go to visit family in Turkey.

An investigation by Die Welt led to another parliamentary question that [confirmed](#) that when asylum seekers are not granted refugee status and are deported back to Turkey, the Turkish government often demands – and is given – detailed information about their asylum process, including highly sensitive statements that could be used against them on their return.

In a different scenario, a Kurdish man was [deported](#) to Turkey a year ago who had lived all his life in Germany but had a Turkish passport. He had got two criminal convictions after fights with Turkish nationalists, and Germany wanted rid of him, but his history makes him a target in Turkey and he had already faced many death threats.

Bans on going out of Germany have been [imposed](#) on a growing number of people (66 in 2022) and mostly affect left activists and Kurds. People have also been blocked from making specific journeys. Buses were [stopped](#) and searched on their way to the demonstration in Paris that protested the triple murder last December and also the triple murder of three Kurdish women activists ten years before. 24 activists were removed and prevented from going.

German immigration law allows for restrictions to be put on the political activities of refugees. Another parliamentary question found that an [activity ban](#) is currently being applied to thirteen refugees, of whom six are Kurds.

Many Kurdish Movement symbols are banned, and police often [stop protestors carrying](#) other symbols, such as YPG and YPJ flags, which are not on the banned the list. Demonstrators wanting to protest the prison conditions being suffered by Abdullah Öcalan were [told](#) they could not show his image.

Police [blocks and detentions](#) have become a regular part of the long youth marches carried out by the Kurds and their international supporters. And Kurdish associations face [police raids](#), as can individual homes.

Accusations of using banned symbols have been used to [prosecute](#) former MP Michel Brandt. Included in the evidence against him were pictures he had

posted on Facebook of a demonstration outside the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, where he had spoken out against Turkey's attacks on Rojava.

A Kurdish activist on trial in Koblenz as an alleged PKK organiser, has been [held in solitary confinement](#). A recent report on his ongoing trial [commented](#), "On the one hand it became clear how closely the German security authorities monitor politically engaged Kurds, and on the other hand how arbitrarily and superficially the information collected is interpreted." Questions have been raised about other trials, too.

The [arrest](#) of leading Kurdish activist, Tahir Köcer, in December made him the tenth Kurdish activist currently in custody or detention in Germany.

A Kurdish activist, who had been given political asylum in Switzerland to escape a prison sentence in Turkey, was [arrested](#) when on a visit to Germany, in compliance with a Turkish Europol request. His "crime" was working with the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

Official visits between Turkey and Germany have included [a visit by Germany's federal prosecutor](#), when he met with President Erdoğan as well as with his Turkish counterpart. What was discussed has not been made public.

Öcalan's birthday

Despite all the repression, on 4 April, Kurds everywhere celebrated Öcalan's 74th birthday. In fact, the repeated attacks only make them more committed to the struggle for a peaceful and dignified existence, while the lack of news from Öcalan's island prison ensures that his welfare remains people's central concern. Öcalan's vital role in catalysing Kurdish consciousness is reflected in celebrations that present his birthday as, simultaneously, the birthday of the Kurdish people. It is an excuse for a dance – of course – and also a time to [plant trees](#).

One person who cannot celebrate is Öcalan himself. This is the 25th birthday he has spent inside the most brutal of all Turkey's brutal prisons, and his third

under conditions of total isolation. He has had no known contact with the outside world since a brief curtailed phone call with his brother on 25 March 2021. But, as we have seen so clearly in Hamburg, the establishment has little sympathy for Öcalan or his ideas. Even the international organisations that are supposed to oversee international law on human rights do little more than go through the motions.

Rulings by the European Court of Human Rights are not followed up, and cases are dragged out over many years. Recommendations from the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) are routinely ignored, without the Turkish government suffering any consequences. And the CPT refuses to confirm whether or not their delegation met with Öcalan last September, or to give any information as to his health or condition.

Last July, Öcalan's lawyers submitted an application to the United Nations Human Rights Committee requesting an injunction against the isolation imposed on Öcalan and the three other men in İmralı island prison: an isolation that is contrary to all international human rights law. The full process is still ongoing, but, in September, the UN [made clear](#) that the isolation constituted torture and should be stopped immediately, with the prisoners allowed to meet their lawyers. When this produced no response from Turkey, the UN repeated their decision on 19 January, giving the Turkish government up to the end of March to respond. We are still waiting for news.

In Turkey itself, successive governments have generated such a climate of hatred around Öcalan that, outwith the HDP, politicians do not dare show him any sympathy, even on basic principles of human rights, which should apply to everyone. As one of Öcalan's lawyers, Cengiz Yürekli, [protests](#), "Everyone is talking about democracy and law. Which law are they talking about in a situation where isolation and torture continue? The government is doing it. So, what are their promises on İmralı? What do they say to this torture situation, which is completely against national and international laws and takes place in front of the society? Everyone should say this clearly. Will the İmralı isolation system continue after the election?" However, the main opposition Nation Alliance around the Republican People's Party (CHP), which has been welcomed as providing a potential escape from Turkey's descent into

fascism, has little to say about how they will depoliticise the judiciary more generally, and chooses not even to address the Kurdish Question.

In other news

I will begin my – far from complete – roundup of the rest of this week's news with the Turkish election.

Last week, a bullet went through the window of a building used by the İYİ Party. This week, early on Thursday morning, [shots were fired](#) at a CHP office in Istanbul. And the election period has only just begun.

The HDP's provincial co-chair and 14 other party members were [detained](#) during the opening of an election office in Urfa's Halfeti district. And police raids on Monday [detained](#) 18 people, mostly members of the HDP's Youth Assembly. Other Kurds were detained in Van and Antalya.

The HDP has announced that they will not make an oral defence in the case for closing down the party. They [state](#) "The closure case against our party started with political motives and proceeded with political interventions. All our applications for the plea date to be postponed to a date after the elections were rejected by AYM [the Constitutional Court] without justification... This attitude of the AYM is an intervention to free and fair elections and our party will not be pleading on April 11". (Because of the threatened closure, HDP members will stand for election under the banner of the Green Left, Yeşil Sol.)

Erdoğan and his supporters made much play of his presidential challenger, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, accidentally stepping on a prayer rug that he had not seen in a crowded room. Kılıçdaroğlu, who has [apologised](#) for any offence caused, has [called out Erdoğan](#) for prejudice against his Alevi religion.

Two officials from the Labour Party, which is part of the Green Left list, have been [indicted](#) for banners spelling out the government's fatally inadequate earthquake response. They are being accused of "openly disseminating misleading information", and a Green Left Party election office has been [vandalised](#).

In more positive news, respected Kurdish journalist, [Cengiz Çandar](#), will stand for election on the Green-Left list. And Kılıçdaroğlu has promised, if elected, to [abolish the law against insulting the president](#), which has seen over 160,000 people investigated and 13,000 convicted under Erdoğan's presidency.

Meanwhile, however, the head of the Urban and Regional Planning Department of Istanbul's Technical University has been [dismissed](#) from her post following a statement signed by academics in the department that criticised government plans to rebuild in the earthquake zones without waiting for professional advice. And TV stations have again been [fined](#) for criticising the government.

HDP deputy, Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu, has [reported](#) that they have investigated 13 deaths in custody that took place in the first three months of this year, and found that 11 died in suspicious circumstances. He noted that prisoners are denied essential medical treatment, or are claimed to have committed suicide; and that three prisoners were fatally shot in a prison riot following the 6 February earthquake.

In Syria, Israel has been [increasing their attacks](#), with a fourth Israeli strike reported in five days. This killed two civilians, while the two preceding attacks killed members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and of an Iranian-backed militia, leaving Iran vowing revenge.

At the – previously postponed – four-way meeting in Moscow, between Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Russia, Syria's Deputy Foreign Minister [reiterated](#) that no meaningful dialogue was possible while Turkish forces remained in Syria.

In response to growing public sympathy between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, Turkish Airlines has [suspended](#) flights to Sulaymaniyah, the effective capital of the PUK-dominated part of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Following the legal ruling that the oil from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq must be sold through the Iraqi Government, the regional and federal governments have come to a [temporary agreement](#) that will allow the pipeline that exports the oil via Turkey to flow again, and allow vital money to flow in the opposite direction – and that gives the federal government greater oversight.

I am finishing this review after day one of the Hamburg conference, spent with hundreds of people who want to make a better world: people who don't want to destroy society, but to save it, who have refused to accept that there is no alternative to the current system, and are arming themselves with that most dangerous of weapons – ideas. No wonder the guardians of the status quo are running scared.

Sarah Glynn is a writer and activist – check her [website](#) and follow her on [Twitter](#)