



TOP STORIES / CULTURE

CULTURE

German singer Wolf Biermann shows solidarity with Belarusian activists

The 84-year-old German singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann is giving his 2020 OVID Prize to Belarusian activist Maria Kolesnikova. He tells DW why.



WOLF BIERMANN, OUTSPOKEN POLITICAL DISSIDENT AND SINGER-SONGWRITER

The eternal critic

At the age of 16, Wolf Biermann left the town where he grew up, Hamburg in West Germany, and emigrated to East Germany, where he first lived in a boarding school. He hoped to live out the ideals transmitted by his mother, an active member of the Communist Party. He would quickly come into conflict with the authorities — and remained disobedient. "I always went a little too far," he says.



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WOLF BIERMANN, OUTSPOKEN POLITICAL DISSIDENT AND SINGER-SONGWRITER

Keeping quiet

East German dissidents could expect work bans, and they were spied upon and arrested. The chemist Robert Havemann (pictured in his East Berlin apartment in 1972 with Wolf Biermann, right) was one of the leaders of the protest movement. The Stasi, East Germany's secret police, monitored everything he did, and discussions took on conspiratorial tones. Biermann had a son with his daughter, Sibylle.



WOLF BIERMANN, OUTSPOKEN POLITICAL DISSIDENT AND SINGER-SONGWRITER

Comrades and artists

The suppression of East German dissidents worsened in the mid-70s. More and more artists applied to travel abroad, but their applications were usually rejected. The Stasi arrested singers Christian Kunert (left), Gerulf Pannach (second from left) and author Jürgen Fuchs (right). In August 1977, Biermann's friends were released from prison and deported to West Germany.



WOLF BIERMANN, OUTSPOKEN POLITICAL DISSIDENT AND SINGER-SONGWRITER

Legendary concert in Cologne

In the sold-out Sporthalle in Cologne, Wolf Biermann gave a concert on November 13, 1976, the first one in West Germany since 1965. The East German government had forbidden his performances years ago, blacklisting him for criticizing the "system ruled by political bureaucrats." Fans acclaimed him in Cologne.

On October 5, singer-songwriter, poet and former East German dissident, [Wolf Biermann](#), will be presented with the OVID Prize for his life's work as a poet at the German National Library in Frankfurt..

The 84-year-old poet and former dissident has announced that he will pass on the prize awarded by the [PEN Center](#) of German-Speaking Writers Abroad "without thinking twice" to Belarusian opposition activist [Maria Kolesnikova](#), who has been imprisoned since 2020.

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WOLF BIERMANN, OUTSPOKEN POLITICAL DISSIDENT AND SINGER-SONGWRITER

Solidarity network

East German authorities stripped Biermann of his citizenship in November 1976, sending him into exile in West Germany. His friend, author Günter Wallraff, first hosted him in his apartment in Cologne, where he had to start anew. Instead of being constantly followed by Stasi spies, Biermann was trailed by reporters from the German tabloid "Bild." It was a difficult period for him.



WOLF BIERMANN, OUTSPOKEN POLITICAL DISSIDENT AND SINGER-SONGWRITER

Prominent sympathizers

East German actors, such as Armin Mueller-Stahl (pictured) and Manfred Krug, who were until then well positioned in East Germany, signed a petition to the authorities in November 1976: "We are protesting against the expatriation of Wolfgang Biermann and plead for this decision to be reconsidered." Honecker retaliated by banning these artists from performing and working. They left for West Germany.

Kolesnikova is one of the best-known faces of the Belarusian protest movement and was sentenced to 11 years in a prison camp in Minsk in early September. Her lawyer Lyudmila Kazak will therefore receive the award on behalf of the opposition politician.

The sentence was handed down almost a year after Kolesnikova's arrest during protests against President [Alexander Lukashenko](#). She was found [guilty of attempting to illegally seize power](#).

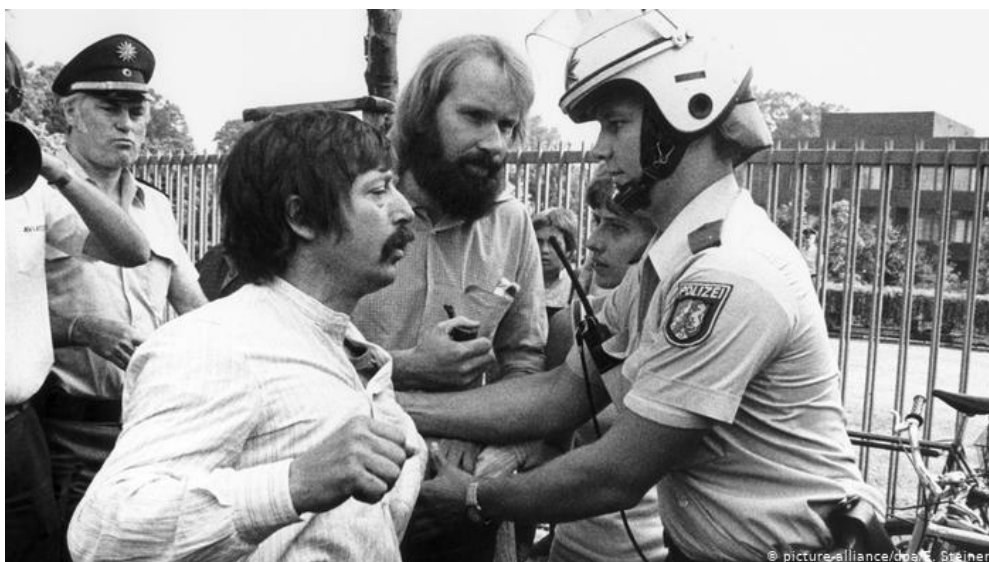
The German government has repeatedly called for the release of the former Stuttgart-based cultural manager.



WOLF BIERMANN, OUTSPOKEN POLITICAL DISSIDENT AND SINGER-SONGWRITER

Under Stasi surveillance

Friends, acquaintances, authors, journalists, artists and other colleagues: Everyone who had been in contact with Biermann was monitored by the Stasi. The artist Gabriele Stötzer (second from left in this Stasi photo) was imprisoned for a year for "defamation of the state," as she had collected the signatures against the expatriation of Wolf Biermann.



WOLF BIERMANN, OUTSPOKEN POLITICAL DISSIDENT AND SINGER-SONGWRITER

The political activist

In West Germany, Biermann remained a politically active and outspoken artist. In 1983, he protested against the deportation of an opponent of the Turkish regime with Green Party politicians Petra Kelly (behind the police officer) and Lukas Beckmann (center). The police was called to clear the protest and Biermann was arrested.



WOLF BIERMANN, OUTSPOKEN POLITICAL DISSIDENT AND SINGER-SONGWRITER

Wild family life

Eva-Maria Hagen (second from left) was one the most popular actresses of East Germany. After she met and became a couple with the political songwriter in 1965, her career ended abruptly, as she was monitored by the Stasi and banned from performing. In 1977, she decided to flee and followed her partner to West Germany, along with her daughter Nina Hagen (right). This family photo is from 1988.



WOLF BIERMANN, OUTSPOKEN POLITICAL DISSIDENT AND SINGER-SONGWRITER

Jewish roots

Biermann didn't mention his Jewish roots very often at the beginning. His father, a Jewish and Communist shipwright, was murdered at the concentration camp in Auschwitz. Biermann would let this painful experience resonate only through his music. He became good friends with the Jewish theater director George Tabori. They are shown here on Tabori's 90th birthday in 2004 at the Berliner Ensemble.



WOLF BIERMANN, OUTSPOKEN POLITICAL DISSIDENT AND SINGER-SONGWRITER

Unexpected honors

He said he found it somewhat strange, but the former East German dissident was still visibly touched when he was declared an honorary citizen of the reunited city of Berlin in 2007. Next to him on the picture is the city's then-Mayor Klaus Wowereit. In 2008, Biermann was also awarded an honorary doctorate degree from the Humboldt University of Berlin, where he had defended his thesis in 1963.



WOLF BIERMANN, OUTSPOKEN POLITICAL DISSIDENT AND SINGER-SONGWRITER

International solidarity

To this day, Biermann continues to prominently support persecuted political dissidents around the world. There's more than artistic solidarity that binds him with the author in exile Liao Yiwu, one of China's most famous poets, who spent several years in prison. In 2010 and 2011, they went on tour together through Germany.



WOLF BIERMANN, OUTSPOKEN POLITICAL DISSIDENT AND SINGER-SONGWRITER

Troubadour of German divisions

A historical moment: On November 7, 2014, during a memorial ceremony for the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Wolf Biermann performed during a parliamentary session in the German Bundestag. He grabbed the opportunity to slam the "comrades" of the Left party, filmed by TV cameras. Speaker of the house Norbert Lammert reminded Biermann that he was only invited to sing.



WOLF BIERMANN, OUTSPOKEN POLITICAL DISSIDENT AND SINGER-SONGWRITER

His guitar as a sword

The song that Biermann performed that day was personally selected by Norbert Lammert. It is one of his most famous ones, "Du lass dich nicht verhärten, in dieser harten Zeit" (Don't let yourself harden, in this hard time). As outspoken as ever, he described himself as a "dragon slayer," and the Left party politicians as "dragon spawn" and "a miserable remnant of what was fortunately overcome."



WOLF BIERMANN, OUTSPOKEN POLITICAL DISSIDENT AND SINGER-SONGWRITER

Respect for Angela Merkel

Wolf Biermann is still a charmer. He complimented Chancellor Angela Merkel: "She is a blessing for our country," he said in an interview with the daily "Die Welt," and added that he admires her composed style of governing. He pleads for more serenity — in politics, too.

Author: Heike Mund (eg)



Belarusian oppositionist Maria Kolesnikova has been in prison since 2020

DW spoke with Biermann about passing on his OVID Prize to Kolesnikova, and his views on the situation in Belarus.

'Inspiring icon of resistance'

DW: Mr. Biermann, what made you decide to give your lifetime achievement award to Maria Kolesnikova?

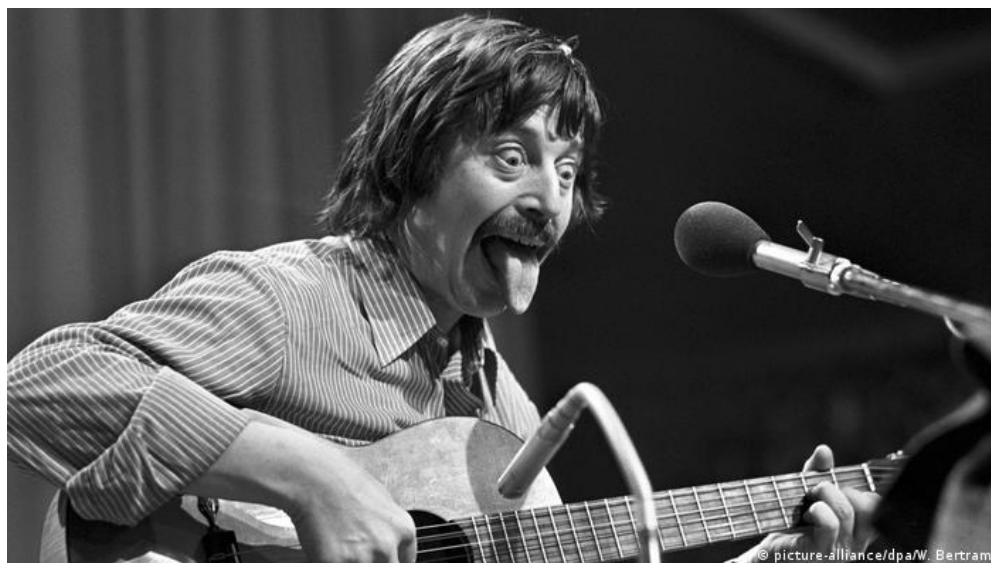
Wolf Biermann: Maria Kolesnikova is an inspiring icon of resistance against the dictator in Belarus, and at the same time she is a weak little person sitting in a cell, helplessly at the mercy of Alexander Lukashenko's henchmen.

She was in the same dilemma as her brave friends: to stay or to leave, and she chose to take the harder path. I won't be able to save her, but I want to stand by her. When I defend her, I also defend all of us who believe in a free, democratic Europe. By the way, it was (German) historian Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk who gave me the good idea to hand the prize to Maria Kolesnikova.

There seems to be a renaissance of totalitarian regimes if we look at the global developments of recent years. How do you feel about this — especially in light of your own biography?

You put it very delicately. Let's say a renaissance of depraved bastards all over the world. If the Belarusians didn't know that Putin would send

There has always been a deep connection between the rebels and freedom fighters in the various dictatorships, even before the collapse of the Eastern bloc. They are always both very lonely and yet connected to each other in solidarity. This is the only way to endure loneliness as a fighter against a dictatorship.



Biermann was expatriated from the GDR in 1976 because his texts were critical of the former East German regime

You will perform your song "Ermutigung" (Encouragement) at the award ceremony, also in Belarusian. What is it that gives you courage right now?

Real courage, but you know that, basically comes from deep despair. It is only necessary in times of existential distress. And since we are talking about Germany, I would like to remind you — we Germans have never been as well off, even remotely, as we are now. The Germans are doing almost dangerously well compared to the state of humanity — of which we are still a part of, by the way. Peace, freedom, prosperity. Some contemporaries forget that all too readily.



Kolesnikova's lawyer Lyudmila Kazak (pictured right, with Kolesnikova's father) will accept the award on her behalf

I wish for the Belarusian people that they manage to free themselves from the brutal dictator Lukashenko. My respect goes to the women. Lukashenko fears women even more than men. This is something wonderful and new in mankind's eternal struggle for freedom.

A song of encouragement

First published as a poem in 1968 and later set to music, Biermann had written "Ermutigung" (Encouragement) for his friend Peter Huchel who was under house arrest and surveillance by the [East German Stasi](#), the state security service.

A reflection on his resignation at being a blacklisted East German artist back then, it went on to become one of his most famous songs.

The English and Belarusian translation of "Ermutigung" follows below:

Encouragement

Don't let yourself be hardened / In these hard times of ours / The hard ones break so easy / The sharp ones sting so easy / And then are dead in hours

Don't let yourself be bitter / In bitter times like ours / While in a cell you're sitting / The rulers will be fretting / Though not for you of course

Don't let yourself be frightened / Though these are frightening times / That's all they want, the bastards / That long before the fight starts / We offer up our arms

Don't let yourself be misused / Make full use of your hours / You can't just disappear now / You need us and we need somehow / That cheerfulness of yours

We'll make no secret of it / Our times may be obscure / But soon each branch will flower / There'll be no need to cower / And then they'll know for sure

—

каб разьбіцца.

Гэй, ня дай сябе атруціць горыччу / У гэтыя горкія часы. / Гаспадары краіны дрыжаць. / Ты сядзіш за кратамі, / Але не перад сваёй пакутай.

Гэй, ня дай сябе запужаць / У гэтыя страшныя часы. / Яны гэтага й дабіваюцца. / Каб мы склалі зброю / Перад вялікай бітвай.

Гэй, ня дай сябе скарыстаць. / Скарыстай свой час. / Ты ня можаш проста так патануць. / Табе патрэбныя мы. І нам патрэбная / Твая бадзёрасць.

Мы ня хочам нічога замоўчваць / У гэтыя маўклівыя часы. / Зялёныя парасткі прабіваюцца з галінак. / Мы хочам паказаць гэта ўсім. / Каб яны даведаліся, у чым рэч.

The OVID Prize of the PEN Center of German-language authors abroad is awarded every two years. Wolf Biermann had already been declared the winner in 2020, but the award itself could not be handed over to him until now due to COVID-19 restrictions.



DEFIANT POSTER ART BY BELARUSIAN ARTISTS

Three symbols of Belarusian resistance

An exhibition at the Museum Folkwang in Essen shows how artists from Belarus are defending themselves against the regime in the digital realm. This picture by Antonina Slobodchikova shows the symbols of the strong trio of women who stood up to Lukashenko: Maria Kolesnikova's symbol is the heart, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's is the fist, and the victory sign represents Veronica Tsepkalo.

DW RECOMMENDS

Victims of Belarus police violence: 'They said we should just die'

Belarusians who took part in last August's protests were detained in the notorious Okrestina prison in Minsk. A year on, many are still suffering from the effects of torture and abuse. DW spoke with some of them.

Wolf Biermann, outspoken political dissident and singer-songwriter

In East Germany, the singer-songwriter was a figurehead of the political opposition. After he was forced into exile in 1976, Wolf Biermann started anew in West Germany — but always remained true to himself.

AUDIOS AND VIDEOS ON THE TOPIC

Germany: Former East German dissident meets her daughter

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