



netzwerk freie literaturszene berlin

## Reboot Culture for Everyone! Open Letter from NFLB to Federal Commissioner for Culture Monika Grütters

*In July 2020, the German Federal Government announced a new funding program called “REBOOT CULTURE” (NEUSTART KULTUR) aimed at assisting our country’s hard-hit artistic communities during the coronavirus pandemic. Because the Federal Government cannot fund culture directly under the constitution, the implementation of such funding programs is delegated to the six Federal Cultural Funds, self-directed nonprofit organizations dedicated to each major art form at the national level. The German Literary Fund (Deutscher Literaturfonds) is administering the literary portion of this program, which has been given a €5 million budget under REBOOT CULTURE.*

*We were deeply disappointed to see that the implementation programs announced for literature structurally exclude most of the independent literary scene, including non-German-language writers and other literary stakeholders, from any of this support during this global emergency.*

*In response, the Network of the Berlin Independent Literary Scene (NFLB e.V) has sent an open letter to Prof. Monika Grütters, Federal Government Commissioner for Culture, and Prof. Bernd Busch, Managing Director of the German Literary Fund, with our demands for greater equitability and solidarity in emergency arts funding.*

*Read now and share widely. You can add your signature to the open letter by emailing the NFLB’s board at [vorstand@nflb.de](mailto:vorstand@nflb.de)*

**An Open Letter by the Network of the Berlin Independent Literary Scene  
(*Netzwerk Freie Literaturszene Berlin, NFLB e.V.*)**

To  
Federal Commissioner of Culture and Media  
Prof. Monika Grütters  
Office of the German Federal Chancellery

and

The German Literary Fund (Deutscher Literaturfonds e.V.)  
Prof. Bernd Busch  
Managing Director

Berlin, 17 July 2020

Dear Prof. Grütters and Dr. Busch,

We are pleased, in principle, that the Federal Government has provided an additional €50 million euros to the Federal Cultural Funds for assisting artists and artistic infrastructure during the coronavirus pandemic. However, given the drastic emergency situations and the revenue losses for cultural stakeholders as well as the scope of the intended national impact, the 5 million euro budget allotted to the literary sector is inadequate and the conceptual design of the proposed programs is too shortsighted.

Literature – with its diverse, multilingual structure of writers, translators, publishers, event organizers, journal and magazine makers, and many more – has been hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic. Bookstores have suffered revenue losses of up to two-thirds; income streams from readings, festivals, and similar have vanished into thin air; independent event organizers cannot cover their costs due to hygiene and social distancing regulations. Depending on a venue's floor plan, its audiences have been capped at a third or a quarter of the former capacity. Most stakeholders lack financial reserves and were already living precariously before the crisis. And the pandemic is far from over. The literary sector will continue to bear the burden of "crisis mode" for a long time to come.

It is undisputedly a good thing that the funded sub-program "Thousands of Literary (Re-) Encounters with Authors" will create thousands of honorarium opportunities for the authors in question. However, the program's exclusion of any costs for moderation, organization, or artist care, let alone additional expenses and reduced revenues due to the pandemic, makes this funding especially difficult to access for independent event organizers who need to cover such line items themselves and carry the risk of loss. Hence, this clearly gives preference to institutions that, although they are also affected by the fallout of the coronavirus pandemic, are hardly in existential danger. Here, we expect adjustments so that this sub-program can have a positive impact on independent event organizers, unaffiliated reading series, *Lesebühnen*, and literary venues that usually receive little or no public funding. It seems as if the REBOOT CULTURE program considers event organizers from the independent community unwelcome even though they are the ones with the greatest need of funding, the ones facing an existential emergency.

We see an essential need for an additional sub-program that would allow independent event organizers to apply autonomously for grants of their own so that they can at least scrape by and compensate for lost revenues. We would also encourage non-German-language event organizers and reading series to apply for such programs.

Rather than paying small honoraria that amount to just 1% of the total funding amount to a preselected group of past fellows of the German Literary Fund to produce video readings (which gives the impression of only catering to insiders), we demand that a significant budget be allocated to flexible, unbureaucratic bridge fellowships for writers, but also other literary stakeholders. In our view, the #takehome program by the Fund for the Performing Arts (*Fonds Darstellender Künste*) is a trailblazing role model of how public funding guidelines can be open, inclusive, and inviting.

The coronavirus pandemic affects us all alike. The idea of restricting access to federal funding and aid measures through structural exclusions in awarding guidelines should be unthinkable. German literature is no longer only in the German language; it is multilingual. The exclusion of non-German-language writers, as still practiced even now by the German Literary Fund, is anachronistic. In other Federal cultural funds, this practice is a thing of the past – the determining factor is that someone resides and works in Germany. A federal press release (no. 48, 6 February 2020) stated: “Cultural institutions strengthen cohesion and openness to the world.” A federal cultural fund, of all things, should live up to that and reflect a maximum of diversity and openness. It is similarly astonishing that, in this day and age, some 63% of the more than 600 fellows are men and specific genres such as poetry are marginalized, accounting for less than 10% of the fellowship recipients.

We call upon the German Literary Fund to revise its charter: to finally open up to non-German-language writers and to implement grant-awarding processes that ensure greater diversity and increased gender and genre equity. The German Translators’ Fund and the Fund for the Performing Arts have shown the way.

We urge the Federal Government not to leave it at this supplementary aid measure. REBOOT CULTURE needs further targeted and unbureaucratic support measures for the literary sector. It comes down to the diversity of the independent literary scenes that are borne by many smaller initiatives and organizers outside of the large-scale public of newspaper supplements, which enable literary participation and the visibility of diverse literary voices on the ground, whether in large cities, small towns, or rural areas.

Alongside broad-based national grant programs for members of the literary scene, we particularly call for programs designed to make the precarious and usually volunteer-run structures of the independent literary scenes in Germany crisis-proof and to fund them adequately with appropriate funding programs. The coronavirus pandemic has only aggravated the existing structural problems and made them more visible. The ongoing deficiencies in the funding landscape and the marginalization of independent literary scenes have been drawn out – and endured – for long enough.

We call upon the Federal Government to invest even more strongly in sustainable funding instruments that enable stakeholders from the local and regional communities to break out of structures of involuntary self-exploitation and provide them the financial predictability they need to do what they do best: bring people together through literature, foster understanding and social cohesion.

The REBOOT CULTURE rescue program has already made headway with a billion euros of aid. Although investing millions in cultural digitalization projects, online formats and streaming may be a worthy stopgap to help literature get through

the crisis, they are no replacement for vibrant literary communities. Literature thrives on the enthusiasm of direct dialogue, on social interaction, on live events.

We need a REBOOT CULTURE for everyone. Not a patchwork quilt, but a master plan. Only together can literature survive: in solidarity and cooperation, in all its mother tongues, in all its diversity.

To sum up our demands:

### **1. German Literary Fund (DLF) assistance programs**

- Rework honorarium-based funding for writers to at least €5,000 apiece
- Increase budget significantly for honorarium-based funding for writers
- Remove discriminatory eligibility criteria, such as requiring previous funding by the DLF in order to receive a fellowship
- Award grants that are open to all stakeholders

### **2. Charter/funding guidelines of the German Literary Fund**

- End the exclusion of non-German-speaking writers who live and work in Germany when awarding fellowships
- Adjust judging processes to ensure greater diversity and improved gender and genre equity when awarding fellowships

### **3. Other Federal aid programs**

- Establish flexible, unbureaucratic, and needs-oriented grant programs for stakeholders in the literature sector
- Establish sustainable funding programs to safeguard the literary infrastructure of the independent literary scenes in their breadth and diversity
- Establish grants for independent event organizers, literary venues, and reading series to maintain their programs, to cover operating and personnel costs
- Eliminate structural eligibility exclusions for Federal aid and funding programs
- Introduce more cooperative projects between independent literary scenes and literary institutions

To add your signature to the letter, please email [vorstand@nflb.de](mailto:vorstand@nflb.de)