

Position Paper of the VdA – Association of German Archivists e. V.

A free society needs strong archives!

9 positions on strengthening democracy

Archives have the task of permanently saving essential information from public administration, politics, business, science, culture and society and making it accessible to the general public. Democracy is based on forming opinions through facts. Videos, images, audio recordings, etc. are increasingly being used for political purposes, falsified, and thus threaten democratic discourse. The provision of authentic and reliable information by archives is therefore becoming increasingly important.

Especially in uncertain times, it is essential for many people to orient themselves to the past and to reassure themselves of their own and collective identity. It is therefore no coincidence that populist and extremist actors focus on the culture of commemoration and try to influence it in their own interests. This includes questioning whether political decisions in the past were made lawfully. This makes it all the more important for archives to provide reliable information on individual and collective history and to help ensure that government actions are made transparent and false claims can be refuted.

Archives can only perform these tasks if they are equipped with sufficient human and financial resources, have professionally qualified staff and are protected from threats such as extreme weather, pest infestation, sabotage and acts of war. It is also essential that archives are offered all documents relevant to preservation (e.g. email inboxes) by public authorities, among others, and that a balance is struck between data protection and the public interest in information. Essential documents, including those relating to personal history, must be preserved for the general public.

The VdA – Association of German Archivists e. V. therefore calls on the institutions responsible for archives (federal government, states, local authorities, churches, political parties, companies, scientific institutions, etc.) to provide archives with the necessary resources to take over, save and make available their archival material and to provide them with long-term support in making their contribution to a fact-based public discourse. Because a resilient society needs strong archives (Markus Hilgert, former Secretary General of the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States).

We emphasise the following positions:

1.

Archives must be expressly exempted from any announced or potential budget cuts at the federal, state and local levels

Archives in all sectors are currently facing considerable challenges. Above all, the digital transformation in all areas of life (see Position 2) and the consequences of climate change (see Position 3) have a significant impact on archival work. They require considerable effort and additional resources. Even now, this is almost impossible for most archives to cope with.

The situation is particularly precarious for independently run archives (archives of social movements, cultural archives, etc.). In most cases, they are heavily dependent on government grants and funding programmes. If these grants and funding programmes are discontinued or severely restricted, there is a risk that documents of inestimable social value will be permanently lost and will no longer be available to future generations.

The preservation of originals is particularly important in archives. Although digitised copies are sufficient for most purposes, in many cases only the original can guarantee the integrity and authenticity of information. Archives are supported in the preservation of originals by the Coordination Office for the Preservation of Written Cultural Heritage (KEK). This also includes extensive funding programmes. In financial year 2024, the KEK's funds were cut. The VdA is calling for the KEK's funds to be increased again.

The Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States (Kulturstiftung der Länder) and the German Federal Cultural Foundation (Kulturstiftung des Bundes) should set up specific funding programmes for archives or design their programmes in such a way that archives are also eligible for funding.

2.

Digital records in archives must be preserved for the long term.

The digital transformation has now reached all areas of life. It also affects the work of archives in all sectors, and to a particular extent. Whereas in the past most documents entered archives in paper form, the records of the future will consist almost exclusively of bits and bytes. This applies to electronically managed administrative files as well as digital film and photo collections, email inboxes, chat messages, social media accounts and collaboration tools of testators.

The preservation of digital documents poses considerable challenges. The transfer of digital documents requires not only extensive IT knowledge, but also the appropriate infrastructure to preserve the documents in the

long term and make them available to the general public. In particular, archives of smaller institutions (local authorities, churches, companies, etc.) or independently run archives are hardly able to meet these requirements in terms of finances and staff, especially since these are new tasks that must be performed in addition to the existing ones.

The VdA considers it imperative that archives of all types should be enabled to preserve digital records for the long term. Otherwise, significant gaps in records are to be expected, which will make it difficult or impossible for future generations to understand essential contexts of today's society. It therefore calls for the preservation of digital heritage to be recognised as a new ongoing task for archives in all sectors and for the respective institutions to provide the necessary human and financial resources.

The VdA also calls for the establishment and operation of archive networks for long-term digital archiving by the federal government, the states and local authorities to be promoted, thereby advancing the desired cooperation.

3.

Archives must be made fit for climate change.

The consequences of climate change pose major challenges for archives. Floods, fires and extreme storms have already endangered and damaged archive holdings. In addition, archival material is threatened by new animal species and microorganisms that are emerging as a result of the shift of climate zones.

Archives in all sectors must take precautions against accidents, pest infestation, damage caused by extreme climatic conditions, etc. Until now, the response has largely been to react to damage that has already occurred. In future, archives must 'stay ahead of the game'. Based on previous experience, archives across the country have launched initiatives to prepare for the consequences of climate change with best practice examples and emergency alliances. However, the options for prevention available to date are still far from sufficient.

Archive locations must be assessed to determine the extent of the risk that archival material could be damaged by natural disasters. Appropriate contingency plans must be drawn up. In this context, possible changes and risks vary greatly from region to region. In extreme cases, archives must be relocated and their archival material secured elsewhere.

The VdA demands that archive holders at federal, state and local level, churches, political parties, companies, scientific institutions, etc. take on

this task and provide the necessary resources. This also includes setting up specific support programmes.

4.

Archives must be better protected against armed conflict and sabotage.

Russia's attack on Ukraine has emphatically demonstrated that memory institutions such as archives are frequent targets in armed conflicts and are therefore particularly at risk. Their destruction aims to destroy the identity of those under attack. For example, the Archives of Ukraine's National Secret Service in Chernihiv and the State Archives in Kharkiv were among the first targets of the Russian army.

To protect written cultural heritage from armed conflict, since 1961, as part of the Federal Microfilm Preservation Programme coordinated by the Federal Office for Civil Protection and Disaster Relief (BBK), particularly important cultural assets have been microfilmed and stored in the Central Recovery Site (ZBO) of the Federal Republic of Germany. The Federal Microfilm Preservation Programme faces major challenges in the wake of the digital transformation. On the one hand, suitable microfilms are hardly produced anymore and are becoming increasingly difficult and costly to procure. On the other hand, the current procedure is not suitable for securing many genuinely digitally created documents, such as data from specialised administrative procedures.

The VdA calls on the federal government to provide the BBK with the personnel and financial resources to adapt the Federal Microfilm Preservation Programme to the digital transformation, develop it further and continue it on a permanent basis.

In the digital age, archives are no longer only subject to physical attacks. Cyber attacks pose a new threat, aiming to manipulate digital archival material and destroy its authenticity and integrity. As a result, archives may no longer be able to fulfil their role of providing truthful information in the context of political and social debates.

The VdA calls on the federal government to engage the Federal Office for Information Security (BSI) in cooperation with the Conference of Heads of the Federal and State Archives Administrations (KLA), the Federal Conference of Municipal Archives (BKK) and the VdA, to develop new measures to protect digital archival material from sabotage. Archives of all types must be taken into account.

The VdA also pleads for the protection of cultural property to be included in the KRITIS framework act, with which the federal government aims to strengthen the resilience of critical infrastructure.

5.

All documents on which government decisions are based, regardless of their media form, must be offered to the archives for transfer.

In recent years, various digital systems, tools and applications have become established in public administration, enabling essential information to be exchanged, processed and saved. In addition to specialist procedures, these include file storage, email inboxes, messenger services, collaboration tools and business intelligence systems. The use of these systems, tools and applications means that essential information is no longer included in traditional file management systems, resulting in significant gaps in the records held in archives. This undermines the transparency of public administration and deprives future generations of the opportunity to understand important government decisions.

The VdA pleads for all key information relating to the formation of government decisions to be preserved for posterity, regardless of the form in which it is managed and maintained. It therefore calls for all archival laws and statutes to include an extensive obligation that all essential information, regardless of the form in which it is stored, must be offered to the responsible archive for transfer. In addition, the VdA considers it necessary that archives will be enabled to enforce this compulsory provision in practice.

6.

Data protection and the long-term social interest in information must be reconciled.

In recent years, sensitivity in the handling of personal data has rightly increased. However, this sensitivity must not lead to data being lost through deletion that is of considerable value to individual families and society as a whole. Being able to trace one's own ancestors is an essential part of people's identity. This is also demonstrated by the high number of users who contact archives of all kinds with questions about family research. If such data has to be destroyed due to deletion regulations without the possibility of the responsible archive taking it over as a replacement, future generations will be robbed of part of their identity.

The VdA sees an urgent need to strike an appropriate balance between data protection and long-term social interests. This applies in particular to the handling of register data. It therefore calls for a deletion surrogate to be introduced centrally in all archive laws and statutes, which stipulates that personal data should always be offered to the responsible archive for transfer instead of being deleted, even if its deletion is required elsewhere.

The VdA also proposes that the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media (BKM), together with the Federal Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information (BfDI), invite representatives of data protection and all archive sectors to a round table to develop proposals on how legal regulations can be specifically designed.

7.

Professionally managed archives should be competent for all local authorities.

For many people, the culture of history and commemoration is strongly linked to their own place of residence or hometown. Actions such as the laying of Stumbling Stones show that local history particularly moves people. Functioning municipal archives are a prerequisite for this form of remembrance.

Archive laws in all federal states stipulate that local authorities must ensure to archive their documents. However, they only partially prescribe that archival quality standards must be adhered to. In many smaller local authorities, employees without specialist training or volunteers are responsible for archives. In the wake of digital transformation in all areas of life, the demands on archival work are increasing, as specialised knowledge is required to permanently secure digital documents and make them usable (cf. Position 2). If these requirements are not met, there is a risk of massive losses of historical records, which would significantly damage the collective memory of future generations.

The VdA demands that a provision be included in all state archive laws to ensure professional archival quality standards in municipal archiving. It also considers it necessary for the Federation of German Local Authority Associations in cooperation with the Federal Conference of Municipal Archives (BKK) to develop measures to ensure that smaller municipalities in particular can provide professional support for their archives, for example by promoting inter-municipal cooperation. Furthermore, the VdA is committed to strengthening existing archive advisory services and establishing additional archive advisory services (see Position 8) in order to provide smaller municipal archives with long-term professional and financial support for their work.

8.

Archive advisory services are to be established throughout the country.

Many smaller archives are managed by archivists without specialist training and are supervised by few or even just one person. In view of the increasing technical requirements, among other things, in the course of

digital transformation (cf. Position 2) and as a result of climate change (cf. Position 3), colleagues in these archives are increasingly dependent on external technical advice.

Archive advisory services have the task of supporting smaller archives in their technical work, providing further training for the staff employed there and, in some cases, also providing financial support. In Germany, they do not yet exist nationwide.

The VdA considers it urgently necessary that archive advisory services will be established throughout Germany at existing, professionally suitable institutions and that they will be provided with the necessary financial and human resources to carry out their tasks. It calls on the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (KMK) to develop a concept for this in cooperation with the Federation of German Local Authority Associations and the VdA.

9.

The VdA, as the only nationwide association representing archives from all sectors of politics and society, should receive permanent financial support from the federal government.

The VdA would like to anchor the great importance of archives for democracy and collective memory and identity more firmly in political and public consciousness. However, the VdA currently lacks both the human and financial resources to do so.

Until recently, the VdA was only financially supported by the respective federal states and municipalities organizing the "German Archives Days", the annual conference of German archivists and archives. On the basis of significant support from the Finance Committee of the German Bundestag, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media (BKM) has for the first time provided project funding for the further development of the IT infrastructure for the "German Archives Day 2025" and the "TAG DER ARCHIVE 2026" (Open House for archives) projects.

This project-related support is urgently needed and must be continued and expanded. However, in order for the VdA to prepare and implement appropriate projects, continue its archival work, and at the same time continuously represent the interests of archives of all kinds in politics and the public sphere, it is necessary for it to be placed on a better and, above all, more secure personnel and financial basis. It therefore calls for permanent financial support from the federal government, comparable to that provided to the German Museum Association (Deutscher Museumsbund e. V.), for example.



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