

IN MEMORIAM

Rita Süßmuth (1937 – 2026)

A Tribute to Professor Dr. Dr. h. c. mult. Rita Süßmuth – pointing at some of her achievements in adult education and lifelong learning

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Rita Süßmuth was born on 17th February 1937 in Wuppertal, and died on the 1st of February 2026 in Neuss, Germany, at the age of 88 years.

Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier ordered a state funeral for the 24th of February 2026 which will take place in the plenary of the German Parliament.

Her political career

Prof. Süßmuth was an important, well known and highly respected person of public life in Germany. She served as a Federal Minister of Youth, Family, Women and Health. During her time as Minister, HIV Aids had become a key issue, and she strongly argued against any form of discrimination. Other areas of her outstanding engagement included gender and women, migration and integration, democracy and participation, equality and justice, human rights and peace.

She had been a member of the German Parliament from 1987 to 2002. She was elected President of the German Parliament for two periods, and stayed for a full decade from 1988 to 1998. It was a most important period for Germany with the end of the *Berlin Wall*, and the re-unification of East and West Germany. It was also the time when Europe changed dramatically.

Prof. Süssmuth remained active throughout her lifetime. In 2024 she started a new initiative called *ParitätJetzt (ParityNow)* – claiming gender parity in parliaments as a human right. Supporting women had been on her agenda in many ways, she was however disappointed that after so many attempts and struggles still no more than one third usually are women, unfortunately from national down to local levels. The initiative is preparing for their next action day in June 2026.

As a professional

Rita Süssmuth studied history and French literature in Tübingen and Paris, later for her doctoral degree pedagogy, sociology and psychology in Münster. She taught in Osnabrück and Bochum, and later became a Professor in the comparative studies of education at the University of Dortmund as well as the Director of the Research Institute *Women and Society* in Hannover before her political career started in the late 1980s.

She has been the President of the German Adult Education Association (Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband e.V., DVV) from 1988 to 2015, and then because of all her achievements became the first Honorary President, a position she played actively till the very end.

Prof. Süssmuth was a strong advocate of community-based adult learning and education, especially of the German system of Volkshochschulen (folk high schools). She supported their inclusive and integrative functions for the local communities, rural and urban. She called for the acceptance of cultural diversity and saw the Volkshochschulen as instruments for democratic cohesion.

She has been an appreciated supporter of the international work of the Volkshochschulen, and served on the Board of Trustees of DVV International for the last two decades. In recognition of her services, the *Rita Süssmuth Award for the International Volkshochschule* was established in 2019. The Frankfurt Volkshochschule was awarded in 2025 for their civil engagement and exchange with Sweden; Potsdam for their cooperation with Namibia and their work on colonial heritage.

Prof. Süssmuth was a convinced European, and an advocate for lifelong learning as an instrument for adult education and participation, peace and international development. She served on committees of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe as well as the International Organization for Migration – having adult education and lifelong learning on her mind. Her

continuous involvement in such organizations and issues concerned with crisis and conflict, war and re-building society, taking care of refugees and asylum seekers, bringing migration and integration together is still needed today, or maybe even more than ever in regions she worked for specifically, like Southeastern Europe or the Mediterranean where so much more peace-building is called for as recent developments and destructions have shown. (Mayo 2026).

In 1997 she was elected President of CONFINTEA V in Hamburg (Knoll 2014). She played that role very actively, and from that time a number of colleagues in the leadership of partners like Prof. Paul Belanger, Director of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, Lalita Ramdas, President and Prof. Budd Hall, Secretary General of the International Council for Adult Education, and Prof. Paolo Federighi, President of the European Association for the Education of Adults continued to exchange and work together. *The Hamburg Declaration and Agenda for the Future* (UIE 1997) was a strong future-oriented document which had actually only been possible through the sustained leadership of longstanding partners (Hinzen 2022).

This was especially again the case when the European Union was advocating towards a *Memorandum for Lifelong Learning* – she was in the lead together with Paolo Federighi and Wolfgang Leumer in tough consultations in Brussels where she could put all her weight as President of the German Parliament and President of DVV to reach to a document which is important till today. It created the room for the EAEA to take over a *Study on European Adult Education: Trends and Issues*, identifying recommendations which later could then be found in Communications of the EU on *It is Never Too Late to Learn*, and the subsequent *Action Plan It is Always a Good Time to Learn* (Hinzen 2011).

Some personal reflections

I was already in the leadership of DVV International for a decade when Rita Süßmuth was elected DVV-President in 1988 for the first time. She was the first women in this position, and nobody was expecting that she would run this office so successfully for 27 years to come.

The *winds of change* where blowing heavily, and it was Jakob Horn who at a very early phase informed Rita Süßmuth of the interest and potential to open new offices for DVV in Poland and Hungary at the turn of 1990 and 1991.

I recall that she invited me to join her to travel to Warsaw and have consultations with her fellow parliamentarian, member of the Sejm, Andrzej

Szczypiorski, a renowned romancier, whose novel *Die schöne Frau Seidenmann* was in my travel suitcase. The novel is situated in the Warsaw Ghetto, and of course the Polish-German history and appropriate ways for reconciliation through joint educational activities was always present in the negotiations. I was impressed how well they could communicate on the broader political changes, and how easy for them it was to turn to the practicalities of an agreement towards opening an Office in Warsaw in 1991 for joint programs.

The Office in Budapest had been opened in 1990, and as part of its opening events an exhibition on the experiences of the Volkshochschulen in Germany was made available to Hungarian colleagues. It was the beginning of a very successful cooperation which continues to last in many ways till today. I was invited to join the University of Pécs as Honorary Professor in 1996, and I continue to teach there till today. Colleagues from Hungary join the University of Würzburg in their Adult Education Academy as moderators and doctoral students as participants. In the years 1992 to 1994 further Offices were opened in St. Petersburg, Bucharest and Sofia, often with strong support from Rita Süßmuth through parliamentary and political relationships.

Those years of the early 1990s were also the time when the historical past of Volkshochschulen in East and West Germany could come together in the re-unification process. Süßmuth encouraged DVV to have a special project on bringing the Volkshochschulen together as they were reminded on their common history as the Weimar Constitution 1919 had as its famous clause 148: “An adult education system, including the Volkshochschulen, was to be supported on the levels of the state, the Länder, and the municipalities” (Hinzen, Meilhammer 2022). Many Volkshochschulen in East Germany, like Dresden or Leipzig and in West Germany like those in Düsseldorf, Hamburg or Cologne were established on the grounds of the Weimar Constitution. The President of the Constitutional High Court, Prof. Andreas Voßkuhle reminded us on the celebratory event of 100 Years of Volkshochschule in St. Pauls Cathedral how important the Volkshochschulen for the democratic and social development today and in the future (Voßkuhle 2019). An illustrated book looking at 100 stories of the history of the Volkshochschule, including the international dimension, were published (Schrader, Rossmann 2019).

The CONFINTEA V European Follow-up Conference was held in 2002 in Sofia – with Prof. Süßmuth as President of the Conference providing the keynote address, bringing the European perspectives together with the global orientation, deeply inspiring for the national delegations – *Lifelong Learning in Europe: Moving towards EFA Goals and CONFINTEA V Agenda*.

2003 was also the year when she joined the *Lifelong Learning Festival* in Skopje, the capital of what today is called Northern Macedonia. Travelling with her was most enlightening with so many chances for side-discussions on the way, a rich learning experience where she provided so many insights for work in a region which was still suffering from conflict and war, and where DVV International had been invited to serve on the *Round Table Democracy and Human Rights of the Balkan Stability Pact*.

In 2008 the adult education community enjoyed the presence and keynote from Rita Süssmuth on *Adult Learning and Education for Equity and Inclusion within the Context of Participation, Mobility and Competetion. A Contribution to Moving from CONFINTEA V to VI* at the European CONFINTEA VI Pre-conference which took place in Budapest in 2008. It was an important event where the Hungarian Minister of Education István Hiller as well as the Korean Minister of Education Prof. Shinil Kim, host of the Asia-Pacific Pre-conference, participated.

Celebrating Anniversaries of DVV International

Prof. Süssmuth took the international work of the German Volkshochschulen quite serious. There are numerous examples of activities and engagements, also in respect to the organizational development: During the time she served as President of DVV, the former Department for Adult Education in Developing Countries became the Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education, today better known as DVV International (Samlowski 2015). Let me mention three anniversaries specifically where Rita Süssmuth played an important role as President or Honorary President of DVV:

- In 1994 the Institute celebrated 25 years since its foundation in 1969, with Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Dr. Eduard Spranger, providing a keynote in front of a full house of representatives from Government, civil society and universities from Germany and internationally. Rita Süssmuth contributed *The European dimension of adult Education* to the anniversary publication (Hinzen 1994).
- In 2009 the Institute turned 40 years, and together with partners from UNESCO, ICAE, ASPBAE and EAEA the conference on *Financing Adult Education for Development* was an important event on the way to CONFINTEA VI, later in the year in Belém. In her *Introduction*, Rita Süssmuth stated: "The two slogans that have been used over and over in advocacy still stand. "Lifelong learning for the North, and basic education for the South", and EFA has been translated into "Except for Adults", and in the following discussion she argued for the need to move to advocate *lifelong learning for all*. The anniversary publication

carried deeper reflections on the development of DVV International (Samlowski 2009; Hinzen 2009).

- 2019 was the year when the Volkshochschulen celebrated their 100 years. And it was DVV International who invited the international community to the city of Weimar, renowned as the place where the Weimar Constitution of 1919 backed the first democracy in Germany, to celebrate its 50 years. Here it was the Federal Minister of BMZ, Dr. Gerd Müller who advocated for a global orientation, but with a priority for Africa. Throwing the net wider, it was Prof. Aaron Benavot who in his keynote reminded us of *The invisible friend: Adult education and the Sustainable Development Goals* (Benavot 2018). The anniversary publication provides a history of DVV International looking at 50 years through providing 50 stories from different continents (Hirsch, Jost, Waschek 2019).
- At the same event the *Rita Süßmuth Award for the International Volkshochschule* was established with initial awards presented to the Volkshochschulen of Bonn, Hannover and Ulm for their international or intercultural activities.

Publications

Throughout her professional life as a pedagogue and an andragogue, as a parliamentarian and a politician, as a citizen and in later life – Rita Süßmuth was a prolific writer, and she used a variety of media to bring her messages across. Most of her writing was in German, and some of her publications include monographies, commission reports, collections of her writings. Here are some of the titles, with translations in brackets:

- 2001: *Zuwanderung gestalten – Integration fördern* (Crafting Immigration – Promoting Integration)
- 2002: *Wer nicht kämpft, hat schon verloren* (Who does not fight has already lost)
- 2003: *People on the move: the challenges of migration in transatlantic perspective*
- 2007: *Bildung als globale Herausforderung. Zwei Statements – ein Gespräch with Hermann Glaser* (Education as a global challenge)
- 2020: *Überlasst die Welt nicht den Wahnsinnigen: ein Brief an die Enkel* (Don't leave the world to the insane ones: a letter for the grandchildren)
- 2022: *Parität jetzt! wider die Ungleichheit von Frauen und Männern: eine Streitschrift* (Parity now! Against the inequality of women and men: a pamphlet)
- 2022: *Keine Zeit mehr, abzuwarten* (No time to wait)

Prof. Süßmuth was also a renowned presenter and speaker, especially on those areas of her keen concern – women or migrants rights, social justice and learning throughout life. If requested to speak for us at an international event, she asked for a draft of a presentation which she enjoyed to discuss in advance. Later, she would never read it as a lecture or paper, but she preferred to integrate what she found important for her own thinking and select what she wanted to bring across by speaking quite freely, and full of energy. Interwoven and added with her notes she would later adopt the draft as her contribution to the forthcoming publication and report. Some of these writings have been mentioned throughout the text, and with more details in the references.

Awards and recognitions

Her engagements were highly recognized and rewarded in many ways, including the

- Grand Cross 1st class of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany
- Magnus Hirschfeld Medal for Sexual Reform
- Reminders Day Award for her great commitment to the fight against AIDS
- Viadrina-Price of the European University Viadrina Frankfurt
- Adam-Mickiewicz-Price for services to German-French-Polish cooperation
- Honorary citizen of Neuss

She was awarded several Honorary Doctorates, including from the Universities of Bochum and Augsburg in Germany, internationally from Universities in Bulgaria, France, Israel, Poland and the US.

Prof. Süßmuth kept her interest in higher education. She strongly supported the Turkish-German-University Consortium, and served as their Honorary President. In 2018 Süßmuth was awarded the Mercator Visiting Professorship for Political Management at the Universität Essen-Duisburg's NRW School of Governance.

In 2006 she was inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame. In her nomination note it is stated: “Suessmuth influenced the growth of continuing education in Eastern Europe, i.e. Bulgaria and Serbia, and especially Kosovo. In 2003, she led the Skopje-Conference, bringing together for the first time since the last war all eight ministries of the

region of the-once Yugoslav territory to discuss the policy, legislation and financing of adult education.”

Saying good bye

Shortly after Prof. Rita Süßmuth died, I prepared a note for the *Newsletter* of the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame (IACE) to inform members. So many colleagues knew her from conferences and other joint ventures. Of those inducted in the same class of 2006, at a beautiful ceremony in the University of Bamberg, orchestrated by Prof. Jost Reischmann, are alive and active: Sir Alan Tuckett, Prof. Ekkehard Nuissl, Prof. Tom Schuller and myself; those who died already include Paul Belanger, Joachim H. Knoll and Franz Pöggeler.

A good number of colleagues who received the note from IACE wrote back to me. A few of them should be mentioned and quoted here:

- “What sad news you bear - and thank you for letting me know. She was a fierce fighter for ALE and its greater funding domestically and through ODA. I last met her in June 2016 in Berlin during the XIV German Adult Education Conference, themed on Digital Participation in ALE. She was as inspiring as ever. And hearing her speak, along with Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, her successor as head of DVV, one had a solid sense that international cooperation, multilateralism and adult education were in good hands with such staunch and competent defenders. How distant that all seems today... But the image that stays most vividly in my mind is my last view of Rita Süßmuth - boogie-ing away to a live band during this VHS Conference party! I hope - wherever she is - that she is dancing with as much joyful abandon as on that summer night in Berlin. It is so deserved.” - Maria Lourdes Almazan Khan, Former Secretary General of the Asia South Pacific Association of Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE)
- “This is truly sad news. When we founded EAEA, her support was essential. Despite holding the office of President of the Bundestag (if I recall correctly?), she dedicated a great deal of time to us. I remember once she flew specifically from Zurich to Brussels just to meet with me and support our efforts in promoting the creation of the Grundtvig Programme. She spoke with us with a sense of cooperation and positive complicity, like a *primus inter pares*. I have always been grateful to her, both as a former president and founder of EAEA - alongside others from DVV, such as the unforgettable Prof. Günter Dohmen - and on a personal level. Her support made the pursuit of our goals much less

arduous, whether at the European Parliament, the Commission, or through our work with UNESCO in Hamburg.” -

Prof. Paolo Federighi, Former President of the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA)

- “Prof. Rita Süßmuth was clearly a remarkable leader whose legacy in the German Parliament, women's rights, and education – particularly through CONFINTEA V – has left a lasting impact. Her contribution as a long-standing President of DVV and her 2006 induction into the Hall of Fame are testaments to her dedication.” - Prof. Suwithida Charungkattikul, President, Friends of PASCAL International Member Association (PIMA)
- “Remembering CONFINTEA V in Hamburg in 1997 with Rita, its vibrant atmosphere and poetic resolution. It was a strong aspiration for the European Memorandum on Lifelong Learning in 2000, and later on for the EU Grundtvig Programme 2007-13. CONFINTEA VI in Belém in 2009 was all about implementation of the utopian visions of CONFINTEA V, and maybe they have now come a bit further with CONFINTEA VII in Marrakech in 2022 and its call for lifelong learning as a human right, on par with basic education. One day the history behind the history of the creation of the Grundtvig Programme should be written. And an updated history of the history behind CONFINTEA as well. As well as for ICAE.” - Prof. Arne Carlsen, Former Director, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)
- “That is sad news but a life to celebrate. She had a very distinguished career in academic and in public life and was deeply supportive of adult and lifelong education. I remember her at the Confintea V in Hamburg.” - Prof. Timothy Ireland, Vice President, PIMA
- “Very sad. I recall some wonderful conversations with Rita during the preparation for the Hamburg meetings. She was an exceptional human being. Condolences to family and friends.” - Prof. Budd Hall, Former Secretary General, International Council for Adult Education (ICAE)

In memoriam - thank you

Both the German and international adult education world must thank her greatly. We acknowledge her achievements in life with appreciation and respect and will remember her with gratitude as a visionary leader, colleague and mentor, a fighter and friend.

Certainly, Rita Süßmuth has been one of the most important persons in my professional life, highly influential for my personal life also.

There are so many milestones we could travel together, from her beginnings in DVV, her engagements for DVV International, being classmates of the 2006 Hall of Fame induction, her initiative in the DVV Executive Board to pave the way for my final full-time professional years in Southeast Asia. The DVV General Assembly in 2015 was another joint experience: She stepped down as President, and I got my farewell after those decades in the leadership of DVV International.

Finally, I should like to mention also the invitation by Prof. Egetenmeyer to take good care of Prof. Süßmuth during the day she was the guest of honor of the University of Würzburg for the Adult Education Academy in 2023 celebrating the 10th Anniversary - and her inspiring key note on *Adult Education - Science for Practice*.

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