

BioGrafie – Annette Widmann-Mauz, former Minister of State

## **Whether you're in a shark tank or the shower – optimism is a duty**

**(Stuttgart/Tübingen) – Annette Widmann-Mauz used to be Member of the Bundestag (Germany's Parliament) for Tübingen and part of the Christian Democrat Union (CDU) parliamentary group. She was also Parliamentary State Secretary for Migration, Refugees and Integration in the Federal Chancellery, and was a member of the German Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs and Committee on Cultural and Media Affairs. Earlier in her career, she was Parliamentary State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Health, and has been an advocate for gender equality, including as national chair of the Christian Democrats' Women's Union. She left the Bundestag after 27 years, but remains a combative, dedicated democrat with a clear political compass and plenty of ideas – which often come to her in the shower.**

"I survived in the shark tank because I always made sure to consider things from other perspectives," says Annette Widmann-Mauz confidently. She was a Member of the Bundestag from 1998 to 2025. After 27 years, she chose to stand down – it's easy to guess what she means by "shark tank". The 58-year-old is not afraid of baring her own teeth, however – especially not when it comes to issues she really cares about. She showed this passion when it came to criminalising the purchase of sex, preventing female genital mutilation and providing courses on gender equality for asylum seekers.

Even while she was young, Widmann-Mauz led a Roman Catholic girls' group. Later, she became chair of the CDU's Women's Union. Despite all her work for women's rights, she has never considered herself a "typical feminist". The praise she received from "Emma" – a German feminist magazine – for demanding an end to prostitution clearly shows how hard it is to pigeonhole her. Motivated by her strong Christian faith, she spoke out just as clearly against changing the legal rules relating to abortion

(Paragraph 218) – a stance that would certainly sit less well on the pages of Emma. “It is set to become a routine procedure. The reality of the situation – that a human life is destroyed rather than a piece of inconvenient tissue being removed from the womb – is being pushed into the background and carefully covered up.”

As Member of the Bundestag for Tübingen, she deliberately chose health – and not just women’s health – as her speciality. In 2009, she became Parliamentary State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Health. “I wanted to go into an area of policy that suited me as the representative for my constituency, which has a university, where the hospital is the largest employer, and where there is a wide-ranging medtech and biotech sector,” she explains. It goes without saying that this was when she got to know BioRegio STERN Management GmbH, which supports innovations and start-ups on behalf of the public sector and is the main point of contact for company founders and entrepreneurs in the Stuttgart and Neckar-Alb regions, including the cities of Tübingen and Reutlingen. In 2001, the STERN BioRegion and its chosen specialisation of regenerative biology won the “BioProfile” contest organised by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. This was a subject that immediately captured the interest of Widmann-Mauz. “I remember visiting a company and standing in front of a cabinet where cells were being cultured. I was very excited by tissue culture and tissue replacement therapies.” She still sees the work of BioRegio STERN Management GmbH as indispensable – and not just because of the exciting life sciences topics. “The network it creates is vital to forming clusters and making the most of synergies – and not just in respect of competition within Europe.”

Widmann-Mauz values dialogue with industry, the research sector, start-ups and SMEs, and hopes that her political work over the years has helped create better framework conditions for them, “which ultimately can only be good for patients.” She cites the scandal surrounding breast implants as an example – something that led to the (still) controversial Medical Device Regulation (MDR). “The key to that was cleverly delineating how far you have to go to protect patients, and at the same time, how far you can go without having the opposite effect – namely, no longer being able to get any good products.”

However, Widmann-Mauz was not persuaded by every threat from companies that they would relocate their production to the United States. “I remember some of the talks we had where the CEOs of pharma companies were threatening to scale back their site investments if the price regulations weren’t changed. In many of these discussions, it’s easy to forget the advantages companies have in the German market and in Germany as an industrial location.” In Germany, new and innovative preparations would be prescribed and supplied to anyone on statutory insurance, for example. In other countries – even within Europe – many preparations are only available to a small group of patients.

Widmann-Mauz believes Germany has the right approach when it comes to financing scientific innovations, too, for example in personalised medicine and new vaccinations such as the recent mRNA vaccine. “The important thing is that, when it comes to financing in-patient treatment and financing in doctors’ practices, there has been success in getting medical advances to filter down to all patients. I’m glad we have found financing systems that maintain the balance between cost-effectiveness and progress.” Among the legislation passed during her time as Parliamentary State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Health was the modified evaluation and price regulations for innovative pharmaceuticals (Pharmaceuticals Market Reorganisation Act, AMNOG). As part of the Federal Joint Committee (G-BA), the highest decision-making body for the joint self-regulation of healthcare organisations in Germany, she helped ensure that body was able to support medical advances. “I’m proud that we created the innovation fund at the G-BA. When medical procedures and types of treatment don’t initially seem promising from the perspective of the organisations that will be meeting the cost, this fund provides the option of trying them out with booster funding.” She hopes this will also open up opportunities for therapeutic approaches, structures and companies that have not yet found backers from among statutory health insurance companies, or that can’t sustain their financing until their costs are finally recouped. After all, when it comes to new methods of treatment or medications, she has always been both curious and sceptical. “I know that not every hopeful development turns into a concrete, successful product on the market. Especially in the pharmaceutical sector, it was exciting to see what is in the pipeline and how many products are in development. Unfortunately, I have also seen cases where the additional benefits were not as clear as had been hoped. Before they get close to

anything worthy of a Nobel Prize, the researchers have often had to deal with many, many setbacks.”

### **Science is global – home is where the heart is**

Due to the current political situation, Tübingen – which is producing world-leading work – is becoming increasingly attractive for American researchers. Nevertheless, Widmann-Mauz has a warning. “Especially because of this, we also have to see things from the perspective of those who don’t have a German or European background. Nationalistic thinking, for example, is particularly counter-productive when it comes to our attractiveness in competition with other countries in the free world.” Her position on taking a stand against right-wing extremists is clear to see in her voting record in the Bundestag, specifically when it came to a joint motion with the AfD (the largest far-right party in Germany) to tighten measures against illegal immigration in January. Widmann-Mauz was one of the CDU members who deliberately abstained. “My decades of experience with scientific issues have given me a global perspective. It’s not important where someone comes from, what they look like, or what they believe. What matters is what they can contribute, where they want their research to lead, and what advances it will make possible.” For her, having an international perspective doesn’t stop her loving her homeland. “If you’re somewhere in Africa and see German products being used – such as testing kits for pandemics – then it really feels good. It doesn’t always have to be a Mercedes.”

### **Don’t fit the frame – make the frame**

Widmann-Mauz studied political science and law at Tübingen University – that was where her passion naturally lay, although the sciences, and particularly medicine, were never complete unknowns to her. “There are doctors and pharmacists in my family, but that wasn’t what I felt drawn to. Even as a child, I loved to debate, and really pestered my parents as a result. When I was asked at my Confirmation what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said I wanted to be a judge,” Widmann-Mauz says. She later realised that she could achieve much, much more as a politician. “I wasn’t constrained within a legal framework set by someone else – I was able to help shape that framework myself. That’s what has always fascinated me – helping bring about changes that I feel are good, right and desirable.” This motivation is also heavily influenced by her Christian faith. “I was brought up as a Roman Catholic and got

involved in charitable youth work when I was young. I wanted to see a fair, humane society that doesn't neglect the marginalised." She readily admits that there has occasionally been tension between her faith and science. "I always found ethical questions in the German Bundestag very challenging. I tried to maintain a balance and have not always satisfied the expectations of scientists and researchers. For me, medicine is first and foremost a science that serves humanity, and it should be balanced against the long-term consequences for society. Of course, you have to take into account the individual needs and necessities of people who depend on medical progress."

This did lead to some dilemmas for the politician – for example in relation to organ transplants. "For me, life is a gift, and every decision a patient makes with regard to their health and body is deeply personal. My priority is maintaining this principle and safeguarding self-determination over life, even in the most difficult situations. That is why I continue to oppose the idea of presumed consent. I understand the personal interests of everyone who is dependent on donor organs for their own survival. And yet, I don't feel this suffering gives an absolute right to organ donation without personal consent or permission from families – not even after someone has died." A similarly controversial topic is embryonic stem-cell research. "There are countries in this world that don't tie themselves in knots over this the way we do in Germany. What if these techniques lead to findings that could be beneficial for us, too? Do the ends therefore justify any means? I don't think so. That raises the question, however, of how we are to handle findings that have been reached in ways we consider unethical? Are they then justifiable? In case of doubt – yes." Pre-implantation genetic testing also poses similar dilemmas for Widmann-Mauz. "On the one hand, you have couples who want to have children, but any children they might conceive naturally could have a genetic condition that will threaten their health or survival. At the same time, we have a responsibility not to fundamentally question the right to life and very existence of people with disabilities – even severe disabilities." She openly admits that these were always the hardest considerations for her, and that every decision was the result of extensive scientific and ethical deliberations and discussions. "In politics, we have to find solutions to even the most difficult and onerous questions. While you can't completely throw your own basic ethical position overboard, you do develop a

compromise somewhere on your own moral compass that, in the best-case scenario, at least starts to show you a way out of the dilemma that you can live with.”

During her time in office, she had to defend a number of controversial issues in healthcare – such as the practice fee. “We undertook some pretty major changes, and I still stand by most of them. The majority proved to be correct, and still are. However, there were naturally a lot of changes over such a long period, and while some things have become firmly embedded, others – like the practice fee – have been revoked.” She is at peace with her conscience, even regarding controversial issues like that. “These systems are so all-encompassing, so big, that they will always require some kind of reform. If you want to keep such a complex system running, then it’s a never-ending job. However, I simply look at what is happening in countries round about us. I can only say, we have an outstanding health system – albeit there are major areas where work is ongoing.” She does admit to a certain amount of frustration when it comes to ensuring access to medical care. “We created more places for medical students and more scholarships, and we changed funding options. We improved structural conditions to keep practices open in rural areas and also increased pay. What we failed to do was sustainably reduce the bureaucracy doctors have to deal with, when what they primarily want to be doing is looking after patients. Despite introducing electronic patient files, and despite insurance cards and greater digitalisation, we haven’t done enough.” She feels there is still a lot of catching up to do in this area. “If we don’t manage to improve working conditions for our doctors – a much larger proportion of whom are now women and have quite different expectations in terms of work-life balance – then we will have a huge problem in the near future.”

### **Putting yourself in the shoes of people who believe in the exact opposite**

The human factor is hugely important for Widmann-Mauz. “I always thought it was important to try and see things from a whole range of perspectives. Empathy might be something that is not as common in politics as it used to be, but in my view, it is a prerequisite for good politics. There are always several sides to having this kind of understanding for others. This includes putting yourself in the shoes of the people who believe the exact opposite – at the information stand in the marketplace and in debates within my party or at the Bundestag.” She has no sympathy for deliberate and targeted instigations of outrage and emotional manipulation. She would even say they

were dangerous. In relation to this, she likes to remember how she worked together with then-Chancellor Angela Merkel during the COVID-19 pandemic. “Angela Merkel is a scientist. She never made impulsive decisions, but always thought things through and weighed things up carefully – always working backwards from the desired outcome. I learned a lot from her.” When it comes to deeply human and fundamental matters of conscience, however, Widmann-Mauz doesn’t just engage with the subject from behind her desk. “I also debate things really intensively with myself. And my best ideas come to me in the shower, anyway.”

Even though she has now turned her back on the Bundestag, she is still a combative, dedicated democrat. Keeping up her contacts with the scientific community and with life sciences companies is particularly important for her. For example, she holds a number of voluntary offices. “I’m a member of the Board of Trustees of the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaften e.V. (Max Planck Society) and the Board of Trustees of Prof. Eberhard Zrenner’s Foundation for Medical Innovation. Not only do I really enjoy it, but following and understanding all the current research topics and ongoing developments keeps me busy.” She readily admits that she would now finally like to devote more time and effort to other issues that she feels passionate about. “My work for Jewish life in Germany, for example as a member of the Board of Trustees of the Jewish Museum Berlin, is very important to me. I’m still a political person. In everything, even in the face of the current global crises, I’m with Karl Popper, who said, ‘Optimism is a duty’.”

#### **About BioRegio STERN Management GmbH:**

BioRegio STERN Management GmbH promotes economic development in the life sciences industry, helping to strengthen the region as a business location by supporting innovations and start-up companies in the public interest. It is the main point of contact for company founders and entrepreneurs in the Stuttgart and Neckar-Alb regions, including the cities of Tübingen and Reutlingen. The STERN BioRegion is one of the largest and most successful bioregions in Germany. Its unique selling points include a mix of biotech and medtech companies that is outstanding in Germany and regional clusters in the fields of automation technology and mechanical and plant engineering.

**Press contact:**

BioRegio STERN Management GmbH  
Dr. Klaus Eichenberg  
Friedrichstrasse 10  
70174 Stuttgart  
Germany  
+49 711-870354-0  
eichenberg@bioregio-stern.de  
<https://www.linkedin.com/>

**Editorial department:**

Zeeb Kommunikation GmbH  
Anja Pätzold  
Alexanderstrasse 81  
70182 Stuttgart  
Germany  
+49 711-6070719  
info@zeeb.info