

## World Café Table 5

### Academic Freedom in Russia - turbulent times and the role of academia in society

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The ambition of this session was to explore how academic freedom can be performed, explored, and assessed in the non-democratic political environment of Russia under Putin. While having no intention to create a positive image of a repressive regime, we aimed to build a better understanding of how academic integrity can be preserved in a challenging environment, and what lessons related to fundamental values can be learned based on this experience, providing a better vision of how academic freedom can be protected, or recovered when impacted by the repressive political machine. Such a contentious topic of actuality required an approach of respect and co-creation of knowledge through dialogue.

The whole of the global and European Higher Education Area faced a startling dilemma this February when the Russian Federation conducted an aggression on the Republic of Ukraine. How would the academic community continue to nurture scientific and academic cooperation links with universities and higher education institutions in the Russian Federation, while the Western countries have taken up the course of sanctions cutting the cooperation and communication links with the country. During our debates, there were recurrent issues appearing which colored the debates and were underlined as the most important questions.

- **Nurturing individual contacts while cutting institutional ties:** The complex international situations require ad hoc decision-making by the higher education institutions (HEIs) and decision being taken on a case-by-case approach. Each situation, especially in the cases of international conflict, might need a different approach and the participants of our table underlined the importance of considering the emotional load of the conflict sides, and compassion at the international level. These types of decisions also have two different timelines: the immediate one and a longer term one, which also includes the post-conflict times. The approach taken is an individual one in the aim of making sure that individual dissident researchers are not being isolated in the challenging times and within challenging environments. However, this approach might bring the challenge of profiling practices, and narrowing down scholars to their citizenship status and/or (perceived) ethno-nationality, or even more to their elected government, which would negatively impact academic freedom and other relevant human rights, including freedom of expression and freedom of thought. Self-censorship should not be an

unintended outcome of these practices. Individual approach might require a lot of investigative mechanisms which impinge on the very idea of integrity of academics. Possibility of regime change within such authoritarian context needs to be supported and individual scholars need to be supported in their exercise of academic freedom and freedom of expression, the participants of our table agreed.

- **Developing standards and guidelines in international cooperation:** It is important that, beyond ad hoc decision-making processes, the academic community adopts the basic standards and guidelines which would help the institutions make decisions, but also safeguard them from these decisions being manipulated in propaganda endeavors of illiberal and authoritarian regimes. Courage and solidarity need to be at the forefront of the key values leading the development of such standards and guidelines. Academic freedom is a value that should be safeguarded by both HEIs and public authorities, as well as the academic community itself. It remains unclear however how these guidelines would be easily made operational given the specificity of each crisis.
- **Impact on students:** Students have and can suffer significant consequences from such measures, and they need to be taken into account most seriously, both from the perspective of their precarious and difficult economic status as well as their mental health. Specific measures providing support to students coming from authoritarian environments, and conflicts, need to be put into place.
- **International cooperation beyond the Russian Federation:** We need to rethink seriously the concept of academic borders and practices that close those borders. Academic community has a responsibility towards the generations to come and a responsibility towards the society. What impact are our actions producing and are they truly the most appropriate measures to achieve certain goals i.e. does the prevention of the excellent scholars in mathematics from participating in an international conference truly impacts the authoritarian regime in the Russian Federation or does it leave unintended consequences on academic cooperation, the scholars within and outside the country in question and future generations of mathematicians? The situation in Syria has been given as a challenging example of how academic cooperation can continue within conflict societies and through this example, the academic community has been invited to thoroughly reflect upon these issues, including the question of agency and decision-making powers – who should be bringing the decision to cut, renew, or establish academic cooperation channels? Most importantly, the academic community needs to differentiate the role of science diplomacy from the role of diplomacy for science, while taking into account the different principles of diplomacy and of science and research.