

# HUMBOLDT KOSMOS

Research – Diplomacy – Internationality

No. 117/2025



*Free science*

For ten years, the Philipp Schwartz Initiative has been committed to supporting academic freedom and researchers at risk from all over the world.



**More opportunities for  
your research —** become  
part of the Global Minds  
Initiative Germany.



# Welcome to the new Kosmos magazine!

Summer 2015. The Humboldt Foundation and the Federal Foreign Office launch the Philipp Schwartz Initiative to enable researchers at risk to continue their research in Germany. The response is overwhelming: from universities that host researchers, from academics who offer to become mentors and, last but not least, from funders who are willing to provide additional fellowships.

Fast forward ten years. Support for the Philipp Schwartz Initiative is unchanged – as is the need to protect people who are persecuted for their research. Nevertheless, the world often feels quite different: Whilst we in Germany take academic freedom for granted and consider the ideal of knowledge-driven research to be more-or-less sacrosanct, such certainties are crumbling elsewhere. Even former fellow-campaigners and pioneers like the United States are increasingly turning away from them. The consequences for our democracies, global cooperation in science and our ability to tackle the major issues of the future are difficult to predict.

Against this backdrop, we consider it all the more important to make a clear commitment to academic freedom, something for which the Philipp Schwartz Initiative is a byword in Germany. What exactly this involves, you can read in this issue. What are the experiences of those sponsored under the initiative? What impact does the programme have on Germany as a research location and on the world? And what does all this tell us about the state of academic freedom globally?

We wish you an interesting read!  
Your editorial team

The Kosmos team of Ulla Hecken, Nina Hafenegger, Teresa Havlicek and Kristine Logemann in conversation with Katja Machacsek and Frank Albrecht of the Philipp Schwartz Initiative and Academic Freedom Division (from l. to r.).





Kyiv, Ukraine, New Year 2022:  
parts of Taras Shevchenko National  
University of Kyiv damaged by a  
Russian rocket attack



CONTENT

# 10

**Focus Academic Freedom**  
10 years of the Philipp Schwartz Initiative

- 10 High-risk research: How threatened researchers are given prospects
- 21 “Indicator of a free society”: An interview with Foundation President, Robert Schlögl, and Robert Quinn of Scholars at Risk
- 26 Guest article by Foreign Minister, Johann Wadephul: “Knowledge is the greatest asset”

36 The future of academic freedom:  
Additional voices in the centrefold

IMPRINT ISSN 0344-0354

**PUBLISHER** Alexander von Humboldt Foundation **RESPONSIBLE FOR CONTENT** Kristine Logemann **EDITORIAL MANAGEMENT** Teresa Havlicek **EDITORS** Nina Hafenegger, Ulla Hecken, Lisa Purzitza **ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS** Dr Lynda Lich-Knight **PRODUCTION & GRAPHICS** Raufeld Medien GmbH: Annemarie Kurz (Project Management), Daniel Krüger (Creative Direction), Juliana Hesse (Art Direction), Konrad Modrzejewski **FREQUENCY** once or twice a year **CIRCULATION OF THE ISSUE** 46,000 **PRINT** L.N. Schaffrath GmbH & Co. KG DruckMedien **ADDRESS** Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung—Redaktion Humboldt Kosmos—Jean-Paul-Straße 12, 53173 Bonn, Germany

presse@avh.de  
www.humboldt-foundation.de



Alexander von Humboldt Foundation



@humboldt-foundation.de

## 05

**Quick insights** What drives researchers and what they are currently doing

## 28

**News** From the Foundation’s network

## 30

**Close up on research**  
In the jungle of decisions:  
The behavioural ecologist,  
Meg Crofoot, on her work



## 35

**Humboldtians in private**  
The coincidence of a lifetime

FINANCED BY



Federal Foreign Office

Photos: Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv/Christian Ziegler; Cover artwork: Getty/raufeld  
Photo: Humboldt Foundation/Nikolaus Brade



QUICK INSIGHTS

**PROFESSOR DR TINA MALTI** came to Leipzig University from Canada as an Alexander von Humboldt Professor in 2023. She heads the Humboldt Science Centre for Child Development (HumanKind) there.



## → HOW CAN WE EMPOWER CHILDREN, TINA MALTI?

Even after traumatic experiences, children still often have the courage to face life. The developmental psychologist, Tina Malti, explores what it is that gives them this strength and how resilience can be encouraged further.

“Nothing is as fascinating, magical and complex as childhood development,” says Tina Malti. The diversity of characters alone she finds impressive. “Some children are funnier than any clown, others are particularly sensitive. And yet others captivate us with their capacity for enthusiasm.” Drawing on the biodiversity of the plant and animal world, Malti calls this variety “psychodiversity”. For 25 years, the Alexander von Humboldt Professor has been studying the social-emotional development and mental health of children and young people. One of the things she investigates is how their various talents and potential can best be encouraged – and what it is that makes children resilient, that is, so strong that they even manage to deal with serious crises.

In her role as a psychologist and psychotherapist, Malti worked, for example, with children who had escaped from war zones or had other traumatic experiences. “It’s really important for children like this to develop self-compassion,” she says. “If they suppress their grief and pain, they are in danger of having fears and strong negative feelings catch up with them at a later stage.”

Tina Malti has also developed training methods to strengthen mental well-being: relaxation exercises and meditation, for instance, help to downregulate fears and aggression. She uses roleplay to practice mindfulness, empathy and compassion. “We cooperate with nurseries and schools, for example, and develop concepts for avoiding depression and preventing violence.” ●

Text **TILL HEIN**

Photo: Humboldt Foundation / Ore Huiying



**DR YUZHU PEARL LI** from the National University of Singapore has been a Humboldt Research Fellow at the Leichtweiß-Institute for Hydraulic Engineering and Water Resources at TU Braunschweig since 2023.

Text **TILL HEIN**

## WHAT CAN WE DO TO PROTECT OUR COASTS, YUZHU PEARL LI?

Global warming is causing a rise in sea levels. Storm surges, floods and erosion are on the increase and threaten coastal regions. The environmental engineer, Yuzhu Pearl Li from Singapore, wants to do something about it.

Sometimes, help comes from unexpected sources: For some 20 years, oysters have been becoming ever more prolific in the mudflats of the North Sea. Nowadays, these molluscs form veritable reefs. A blessing – because climate change is posing enormous challenges for coastal engineers. The risk of flooding and erosion is increasing, especially in these flat coastal areas.

The newly-formed reefs prevent sediments from being washed away and the coastline from eroding. The rough surface of these structures can withstand strong hydro-mechanical loads. “Oyster reefs are natural breakwaters,” says Yuzhu Pearl Li, and their growth continuously reinforces the protective effect. “Reefs like this are also important habitats for marine animals and help to improve water quality by natural filtration,” she explains. “Stone and concrete breakwaters don’t have such advantages.”

Li is exploring how these advantages can be exploited for coastal protection: for her experiments she and her colleagues use a 3D printer to recreate oyster reefs, arrange them variously in a wave channel and measure the effects. Using mathematical models, they scale their results so that they can estimate the large-scale impact on the seabed. “As soon as we have found the ideal arrangement,” she says, explaining her aim, “we want to design artificial structures to encourage the oysters to settle” – along the coast of Germany as well as Singapore. ●



# WHO CONTROLS INFORMATION IN AFRICA, SARA NAMUSOGA-KAALE?



**Journalistic standards such as impartiality and independence are universal and the prerequisite for a free press. Communication researcher Sara Namusoga investigates the situation in Uganda.**

“In the last few years, the working conditions of independent journalists in Uganda have deteriorated,” she reports. Many earn ever less or have even lost their jobs. On top of this, USAID funding has ceased which means the independent media organisations have no money to invest in training or investigative journalism. “This opens the floodgates to actors like China, Russia, India or Saudi Arabia. The media are precisely one of the ways they continue gaining geostrategic importance in African countries,” Sara Namusoga explains. China, for example, was equipping entire editorial offices, offering free content from the state agency Xinhua and inviting journalists to visit China. In this way, demonstrably authoritarian states were exporting their own ideal of journalism.

Namusoga is currently investigating just how big the influence is on the media in African states, why media makers in Uganda have started opting for visual material from Beijing or Moscow rather than Berlin – and how all this affects independent journalism. Together with partners at universities in seven African countries and TU Dortmund University, she analyses financial structures and interviews media professionals who have been affected. Amongst other things, the researchers want to explore how new geopolitical actors are portrayed in African media – and the influence this has on public opinion locally. •

Text **MAREIKE ILSEMANN**

**DR SARA NAMUSOGA-KAALE** is a lecturer in the Department of Journalism and Communication at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. Recruited under the Henriette Herz Scouting Programme, she was a Humboldt Research Fellow at the Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism at TU Dortmund University until summer 2025.

# HOW CAN YOU REPAIR E-CAR BATTERIES, TANNAZ NASERI?



**E-cars are becoming ever more popular, while sustainable recycling of old batteries is still in its infancy. Tannaz Naseri, a chemical engineer from Tehran, is working on resource-friendly ways to recover precious metals.**

“We do have recycling processes for e-car batteries,” says Naseri, “but they’re very energy-intensive and harm the environment.” That is why she wants to employ a different approach to developing a sustainable circular economy for lithium batteries. Standard recycling methods extract the reusable metals. “To do so, they either apply extremely high temperatures to melt the batteries and then extract the metals, or they leach them with aggressive chemicals,” Naseri explains. In the process, noxious gases are released, and the carbon footprint is huge.

Naseri, on the other hand, is working on a method of recycling old batteries instead

of destroying them. “We preserve the crystal structure of the battery’s cathode material and restore its electrochemical activity,” she explains. By a process known as re-lithiation, the lithium content is replenished, and structural defects are repaired. “This is cleaner and less expensive,” says Naseri. The method already works in the lab. The challenge now is to implement it on an industrial scale.

At present, the number of recycled e-car batteries is not very high – they last ten years or longer before they are recycled. But towards the end of the decade, the return rate will increase significantly when the first generation of e-car batteries reach the end of their lifespan. Until that happens, it is essential to establish a functioning circular economy for the batteries, Naseri emphasises. •

Text **MARLENE HALSER**

**DR TANNAZ NASERI** from Tarbiat Modares University in Tehran, Iran, has been a Humboldt Research Fellow in the Institute of Circular Resource Engineering and Management at TU Hamburg since March 2025.



# HIGH-RISK RESEARCH

When research is allowed to develop freely, it is enlightening and inspiring, it finds solutions and can make societies more resilient. But it is often no longer possible to teach and conduct research in freedom – and researchers are put under pressure and are at risk. For ten years, the Humboldt Foundation's Philipp Schwartz Initiative has been offering them a perspective.

TEXT NORA LESSING



(Previous page:) Kharkiv, Ukraine,  
24 February 2022: Russian rockets destroy  
the Faculty of Physics and Technology at  
V.N. Karasin Kharkiv National University.

They are some of the thought leaders in their countries. But they cannot continue their research there. “These people do impressive work,” says Judith Wellen, head of the Humboldt Foundation’s Strategy and External Relations Department in which the Philipp Schwartz Initiative is embedded. “But then war and violence destroy universities and labs. Others are oppressed, experience discrimination or abuse – because of their gender, ethnicity, sexual identity or because they voice criticism.” Since it was established in 1953, the Foundation has repeatedly supported researchers who were under threat or subject to political persecution in their own countries – whether during Apartheid in South Africa or in the Cold War years. It was not least due to this extensive experience, says Wellen, that the Foundation started grappling with tailored opportunities for researchers in such situations.

#### PROGRAMME SENDING A SIGNAL

In 2015, the mass exodus from Syria and other crisis regions was the trigger for a targeted programme. “We wanted to find ways of giving the researchers affected a perspective so that they could continue their research and conserve their knowledge,” Wellen explains.

With the support of the Federal Foreign Office, the Foundation launched the Philipp Schwartz Initiative (PSI) and in 2016, the first sponsorship recipients embarked on their fellowships. At the time, this kind of initiative was unique in Europe, but it soon became a template for other programmes. With its PSI, the Humboldt Foundation is now one of the most important actors worldwide in the protection of researchers at risk and is active in EU projects such as MSCA4Ukraine, Inspireurope and SAFE.

To date, more than 630 at-risk researchers from over 30 countries (as of October 2025) have found a new scientific home in Germany, including through special programmes for researchers from Ukraine, Afghanistan and Iran that the Foundation introduced together with the Federal Foreign Office at short notice in response to geopolitical developments and trouble spots. In the meantime, 142 universities have received PSI fellows and built structures and expertise to integrate them to the very best of their ability. For this purpose, as well as the fellowships,



## 10 YEARS PHILIPP SCHWARTZ INITIATIVE

#### Summer 2015

The Federal Foreign Office (AA) and the Humboldt Foundation announce the establishment of the Philipp Schwartz Initiative. From the very beginning, the partner organisations are the Scholars at Risk Network, the Council for At-Risk Academics and the IIE-Scholar Rescue Fund.

#### June 2016

First selection round – the first sponsorship recipients: 18 universities are selected to host 24 fellows from Syria, Turkey, Libya, Pakistan and Uzbekistan.

#### September 2016

Together with 20 academic institutions, the Foundation establishes the German Section of the Scholars at Risk Network that campaigns worldwide for academic freedom and researchers at risk. The Foundation hosts the secretariat for the German Section.

#### June 2017

International support for PSI: the American Mellon Foundation donates one million US dollars for additional fellowships. Up to 2025, Mellon has donated a total of three million US dollars to PSI.

#### April 2018

Together with FU Berlin and Scholars at Risk, the Foundation organises the Scholars at Risk Network 2018 Global Congress in Berlin. The worldwide SAR Network’s biennial meeting is held in Germany for the first time.

the Foundation provides the host institutions with additional funding. Networking is another core building block, so the annual Philipp Schwartz Forum brings together sponsorship recipients, host institutions, mentors, policymakers and international partners. It has now also established itself internationally as a firm format for exchange. Behind all this is the fundamental conviction that research must be free – worldwide.

#### NOT A REALITY FOR MANY

“Academic freedom is a facet of the right to research and, in the opinion of many experts, of the right to education and freedom of expression, too,” says Katrin Kinzelbach, professor of Human Rights Politics at FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg. She is, amongst other things, one of the founders of the highly respected Academic Freedom Index which provides annual data on academic freedom in 179 countries. The figures published for 2024 show that almost half of the world’s population lives in countries where academic freedom is seriously curtailed. And only every third person lives in a country with good to very good protection for the freedom of research. “Basically, it’s about researchers being able to pursue knowledge according to academic logic and free from governmental and non-governmental pressure,” explains Kinzelbach. From the start, she has been involved in the Philipp Schwartz Initiative and was, for instance, a member of the selection committee. “It’s not only important to protect individual rights but also to respect the autonomy of research institutions.”

In Venezuela after 2014, the biochemist, Jeff Wilkesmann, experienced just what happens when this freedom is removed. “The government exerted enormous pressure. Professors disappeared after

voicing criticism. Nobody dared to speak openly anymore,” the PSI alumnus remembers. Colleagues in Germany drew his attention to the programme, so in 2017, he came to TH Mannheim with his two children and his wife, another biochemist who also received PSI sponsorship. “The developments in Venezuela opened my eyes,” he says. “The saying that you only know what you’ve had when you lose it really is true. I had previously taken the freedom of research for granted.”

#### STRONG VOICE FROM THE DIASPORA

The pharmaceutical chemist, Rana Alsalmim from Syria, has also been shaped by her experiences. With the aim of helping local pharmaceutical companies to produce desperately needed drugs, she established a working group on cancer medication based on natural substances in Damascus during the civil war. But the interdisciplinary project met bureaucratic hurdles and did not receive any funding. Then bombs fell on the labs. Alsalmim heard about the Philipp Schwartz Initiative from a colleague. Her application went through smoothly. “Due to my qualifications, I was accepted very quickly,” the researcher remembers. Colleagues supported her when she arrived in Berlin in 2017, helped her get accommodation and find her way professionally.

The researcher still follows the situation in Syria very closely and with considerable concern. “There is no free research in Syria anymore. That was one of the main reasons why I left the country,” she says. Initially, she hoped things would improve after the regime change but this had not happened so far. Nowadays, religiously motivated murders were the order of the day, making it impossible for her to return home; Alsalmim is a member of the Alawite ➤

Venezuela, May 2014: Students protest against the government of Nicolás Maduro, the country's escalating economic and national crisis, growing criminality, corruption and inflation. Security forces respond with forced removals, mass arrests and brutality.

minority. She has now been made redundant by her Syrian university – due to her religion, she suspects. “This also demonstrates that academic freedom in my country has become a distant prospect, especially for women and minorities.”

From the diaspora, Rana Alsalm draws the public's attention to this issue. She speaks on panels such as at the 2025 Philipp Schwartz Forum in Berlin where the Foundation brought together Syrian exiles – not least in the hope of having a positive effect on developments in the country by reinforcing the Syrian diaspora. “For researchers in exile, academic freedom is not just an abstract principle,” Alsalm emphasises. “It is the foundation for beginning again, for networking and contributing to global science.”

In the course of her PSI fellowship, Alsalm was initially a postdoc in a medical chemistry group, later moving to industry. She describes her experiences in the German academic system as a fight for recognition. As a foreign woman researcher, she was met with reservations, did not always feel that her performance and qualifications were recognised. “Now, my goals are to get a permanent position in ➤

“  
The government  
exerted enormous  
pressure. Nobody  
dared to speak  
openly anymore.”

Jeff Wilkesmann,  
Venezuelan biochemist

#### September 2018

The German Bundestag and the AA cement the programme: previously time-limited, the initiative now receives robust basic funding from the AA on a permanent basis.

#### March 2019

The Philipp Schwartz Forum becomes a platform for exchange and networking amongst fellows and host institutions as well as national and international actors on the protection of academic freedom and support for researchers at risk.

#### October 2019

The Foundation becomes involved in the EU-funded Initiative InSPIREurope (Initiative to Support, Promote and Integrate Researchers at Risk in Europe) to reinforce academic freedom and the protection of researchers at a European level.

#### November 2021

In response to the takeover by the Taliban, the Foundation sets up a special programme for the first time. The aim is to quickly support researchers affected, taking account of the particular situation in Afghanistan.

#### March 2022

After the Russian invasion, the AA, Gerda Henkel Foundation and the Stiftung Mercator facilitate special funding for Ukrainian researchers. Springer Nature and the Carl-Zeiss-Stiftung finance a PSI emergency fund Ukraine to provide immediate aid.

#### July 2022

The EU Commission creates the first fellowship programme for Ukrainian researchers at risk, MSCA4Ukraine, and tasks a consortium comprising SAR Europe, the European University Association and the Foundation with implementation.

#### April 2023

The special programme for Iran is developed in response to the protests there following the killing of Jina Mahsa Amini and the escalating persecution of researchers.

Photo: picture alliance/AP Photo



#### Support from third party funders

From the beginning, private donors supplemented the financing provided by the AA: the Alfried Krupp von Bohnen und Halbach Foundation, the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, the Gerda Henkel Foundation, the Klaus Tschira Foundation, the Robert Bosch Stiftung, the Stiftung Mercator, the Stifterverband, the Mellon Foundation, the Carl-Zeiss-Stiftung, Springer Nature, the Buschmann-Simon-Treuhandstiftung as well as several private individuals.

#### Outlook

The Foundation wants to extend European cooperation on PSI. The aim is to provide greater support for the countries affected – such as Syria and Ukraine – not least with regard to possible reconstruction.

#### June 2024

In a series of conversations on “Fragile Freedom”, PSI fellows report on their experiences and the conversations are turned into podcasts. The series is implemented by con gressa together with the Foundation and funded in the context of the BMBF’s 2024 Science Year “Freedom”.

#### 2023/24

New networking formats: at the Humboldt4Ukraine series of events and a network meeting, the Foundation, the DAAD, the German Federal Environmental Foundation, the Gerda Henkel Foundation, Leopoldina, and Volkswagen Foundation bring together Ukrainian researchers, funding organisations, and politicians. They address the reconstruction of the Ukrainian science system and perspectives for researchers after the war.

a large pharmaceutical company and a visa for my husband so that he can join me.”

#### THE ROLE OF HOST INSTITUTIONS

Ulrike Freitag has been confronted with biographies like this time and again. The scholar in Islamic studies is the head of the Berlin-based Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) that has regularly hosted researchers at risk since the inception of PSI. “We work on regions like the Middle East, Africa and Central Asia and often see how precarious it can be for researchers there,” says Freitag. “For us it goes without saying that we actively support colleagues who are put under pressure.” What was important was that candidates fitted ZMO’s research profile and that there were, moreover, realistic career opportunities in Germany. “To become permanently integrated in the German academic employment market at the end of sponsorship is a major challenge,” Freitag reports, drawing on her experience as an academic host and mentor.

One feature of PSI differentiates it from other funding programmes that usually only run for a few months: fellows are supported for up to three years – giving them time to find their feet again and immerse themselves in their research after their exacting experiences. The sponsorship is complemented by additional support measures and the efforts of university administrations which are often highly committed. “We have now actually employed a colleague who helps fellows when they have to go to official appointments or fill in forms and who provides in-depth advice when they are applying for follow-up funding,” Ulrike Freitag explains. So far, fifty-five percent of PSI alumni have managed to find a job or acquire follow-up funding – most of them within the German science system, others abroad or

in the non-academic sector. Due to continuing poor conditions, returning home is proving to be less viable than was hoped.

#### WHEN RETURN IS NOT AN OPTION

Jeff Wilkesmann for one has given up hope of being able to return home to Venezuela. The danger to himself and his family was simply too great. When his PSI fellowship came to an end in 2019, he wrote endless applications in Germany. Initially, he worked in science management but in 2024, managed to find a permanent professorial position at Deggendorf Institute of Technology, heading the Bioengineering Transformation Lab whilst his wife conducts research in the lab next door. PSI had been a great help on his sometimes difficult journey: “Being a fellow, you are part of a big network and can always ask for advice.”

The Afghan computer scientist Mursal Dawodi is also preparing to live permanently in Germany. She was a junior professor in Kabul specialising in AI-supported translations of the Dari and Pashto languages. When the Taliban took power, her career ended abruptly: her employment contract was declared invalid; women were forbidden to enter the university. Since 2024, she has been doing research at Technical University Munich – sponsored by PSI. With the aid of machine learning, her project seeks to identify hate speech and misogynistic content in Afghan online texts. “Some people believe my research is directed against my country’s culture and religion,” says Dawodi, who was awarded the medal of honour of the prestigious For Women in Science Award for female researchers in exile in 2023. “But all I want is to be sure that women are safe on the web.”

#### BRIDGE TO A NEW LIFE

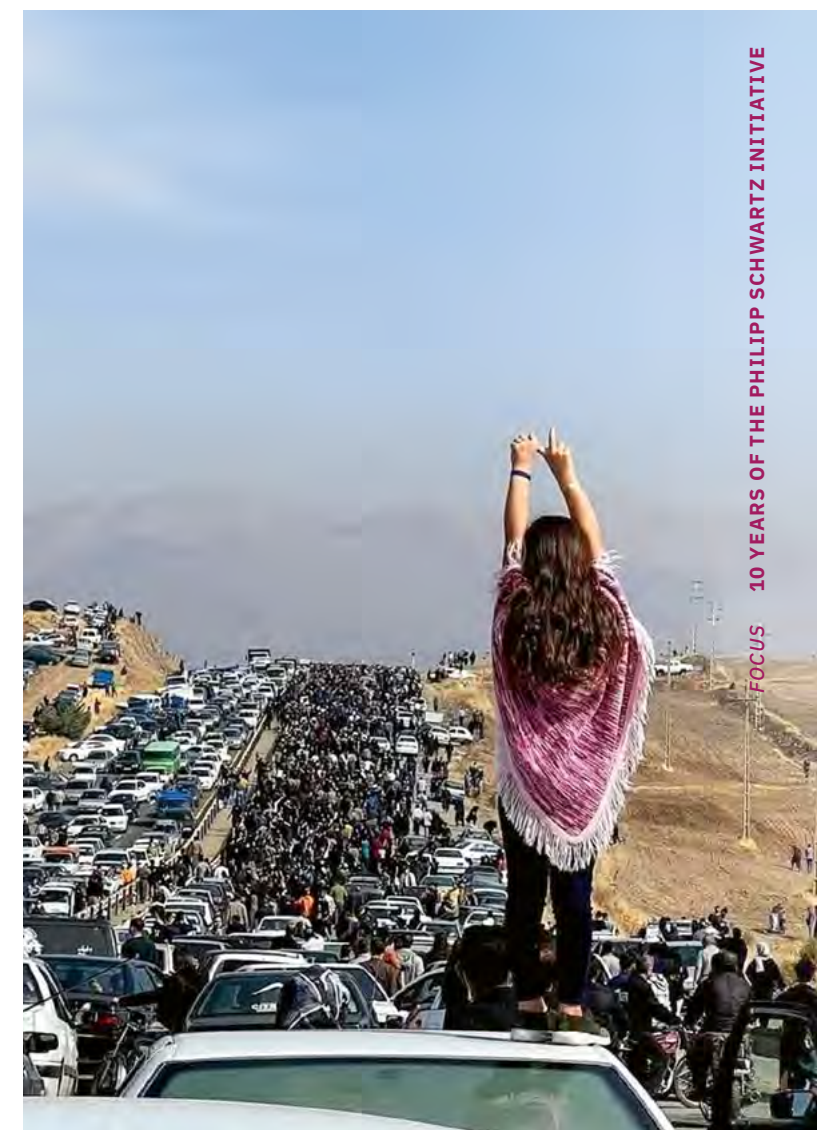
Starting a new life in Germany proved a challenge for her and her family. “We were psychologically traumatised by our experiences in Afghanistan and had a lot of problems with German bureaucracy,” says the researcher. “Moreover, I had the impression that my new colleagues were way ahead of me. That was very stressful.” One reason for this were their different educational backgrounds: whilst schools and universities in Germany and Europe taught broad general knowledge, girls in Afghanistan seldom learned even rudimentary English.

Dawodi campaigns for greater educational equality through Femstech, a non-profit organisation ▶

“

*For researchers in exile, academic freedom is the foundation for beginning again.*

Rana Alsalam, Syrian cancer researcher



Saqquez, Kurdistan, Iran, October 2022: People on the way to the cemetery in remembrance of Jina Mahsa Amini and her fate.

Photo: picture alliance / zumapress.com



she founded herself. It promotes digital education for marginalised groups, particularly women in Afghanistan, through online courses in IT, programming, AI and web development as well as through mentoring and coaching. Mursal Dawodi describes the Philipp Schwartz Initiative sponsorship for her research as a “bridge to a new life” in which she can define her own research agenda. For her, the AI researcher claims, academic freedom was simply vital. “That’s precisely why authoritarian regimes so often fight it.”

#### CORRECTIVE UNDER PRESSURE

Robert Quinn, Executive Director of the international Scholars at Risk Network, says much the same. The organisation, which is headquartered at New York University, has been a close partner since PSI was first established. It supports the initiative in areas such as assessing the risks researchers face. “Academic freedom touches on the question of the kind of society we want to live in,” Quinn emphasises (↗ more in the interview, p. 21 ff). “Free science searches for truth; its findings help us to make autonomous, good decisions and deal constructively with challenges and diverse opinions.” The knowledge generated in the process was not only a form of guidance but also acted as a social corrective. “Where there is free science, those in power have to face critical questioning. But that is exactly what autocrats want to avoid,” he says. “These people don’t work on the basis of facts, but on the ‘because I say so’ principle – irrespective of whether their words reflect reality or not.”

When it comes to academic freedom, until a few years ago, the United States were one of the leading nations. Now Quinn is witnessing at first hand how the political culture of his country has changed enormously – and what this means for the protection of researchers at risk. “In this field, Europe is doing much more and has now overtaken the US in promoting

Kabul, Afghanistan,  
October 2021:  
Women teachers  
and students  
demonstrate for  
equal rights and  
education for  
women and girls.



“  
*Women were  
forbidden to enter  
the university;  
my employment  
contract was  
declared invalid.*

Mursal Dawodi, computer scientist  
from Afghanistan

academic freedom,” says the lawyer. Nevertheless, Europe should not rest on its laurels. Given the political upheavals in parts of Europe, he warns: “The time when we could rely on general declarations of principle and a tradition of governmental restraint is over.” European decision makers should, therefore, enshrine the freedom of research in their countries’ legislation as firmly and as fast as possible.

#### STILL VALUED AND PROTECTED

Taking a look at the latest data from the Academic Freedom Index, the political scientist, Katrin Kinzelbach, notes a slight decline in academic freedom in Germany. Overall, however, it was still very well protected. “But there are no simple recipes for guaranteeing it in perpetuity,” she emphasises. “All freedoms have been won and are thus potentially threatened. We must actively defend them.” To

do so, alliances, practices and structures were required – nationally, Europe-wide, internationally. “The Philipp Schwartz Initiative enables us to host colleagues at risk – that is a solidarisation practice.”

“We have the great good fortune to live in a country that still values and protects academic freedom, even with taxpayers’ money,” says Judith Wellen from the Humboldt Foundation, in summary. PSI was itself an expression of this commitment to academic freedom. At the same time, the initiative was also a reminder: “The experiences of fellows like Jeff Wilkesmann, Mursal Dawodi and Rana Alsalim show that academic freedom dies in small steps.” It often happened gradually and initially unnoticed – through abuses, social pressure, self-censorship, thoughts not expressed, posts not published, research ideas not implemented. “An open society is not a given,” Wellen urges, “it needs our active

support every day.” Robert Quinn underscores this social responsibility: “We must do everything in our power to anchor academic freedom as a core value in our culture. We must communicate the fact that a free, self-determined life is founded on free research and a culture of knowledge.” ●

More about academic  
freedom and the  
Philipp Schwartz  
Initiative in our  
dedicated dossier



*The future of  
academic freedom:  
Additional voices  
in the centrefold*



Who is conducting research under the Philipp Schwartz Initiative?

# 636

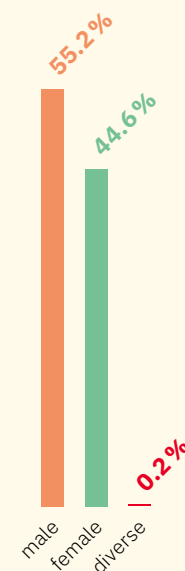
## sponsorship recipients\* from 31 different countries

Since it was introduced, 636 researchers at risk have been sponsored at universities, institutions of higher education and other research institutions across Germany under the Philipp Schwartz Initiative – irrespective of subject and country of origin.

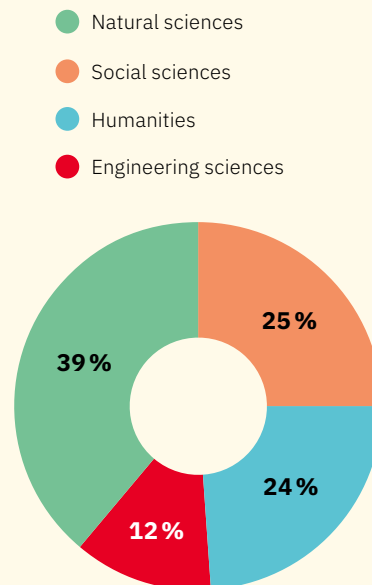
\* under the main PSI programme, not including bridging fellowships and the Ukraine Emergency Fund

### The Philipp Schwartz Fellows

a) according to gender

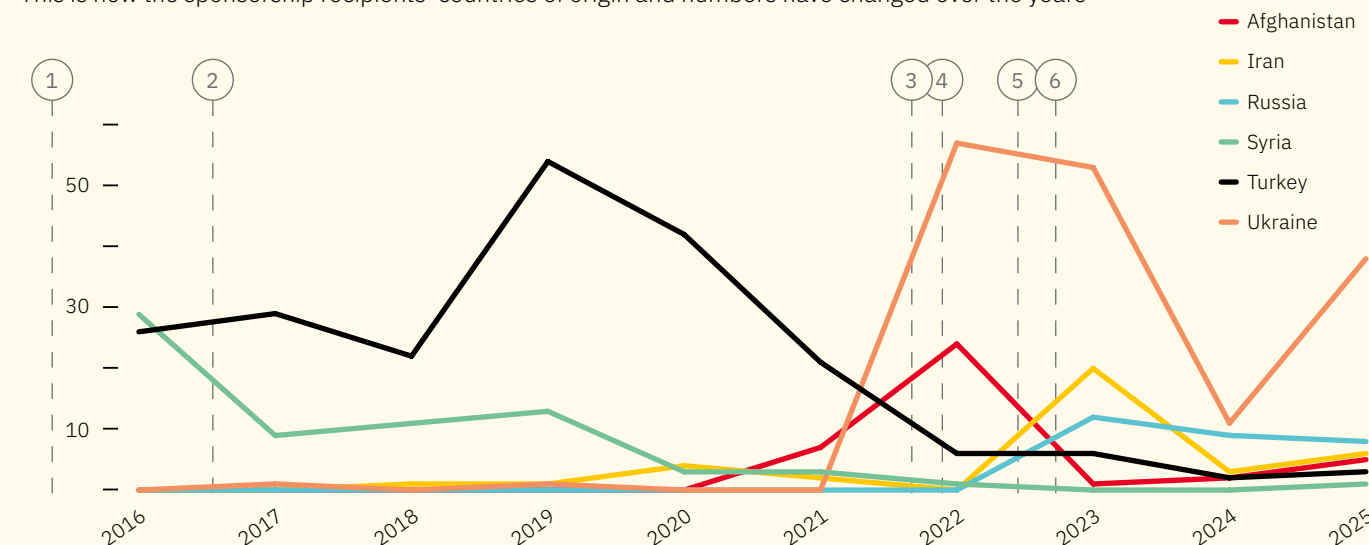


b) according to discipline



### Development of approval rates for the six most common countries of origin

This is how the sponsorship recipients' countries of origin and numbers have changed over the years



- Syria** The precarious situation in Syria – with civil war since 2011 – as well as in the neighbouring countries where many Syrians had fled, leads to a massive flow of refugees from 2015.
- Turkey** In July 2016, a putsch attempt fails. The government cracks down hard on suspected opposition figures with mass dismissals and reprisals, including at universities.
- Afghanistan** With the withdrawal of US and NATO troops in May 2021, the Taliban initially take power in Kabul and (according to its own figures) by the end of September in all the provinces in the country.
- Ukraine** On 24 February 2022, Russia starts a war of aggression against Ukraine. The situation had already escalated sharply in 2021, with many Ukrainians fleeing the country.
- Iran** The death of 22-year-old Jina Mahsa Amini on 16 September 2022 as a result of police brutality triggers one of the biggest waves of protest for decades.
- Russia** Following the invasion of Ukraine, the domestic political situation continues to deteriorate. Russians flee for political reasons or out of fear of being drafted into military service.

Source: Humboldt Foundation, as of October 2025

Photos: Humboldt Foundation / David Ausserhofer, Fred Siegel

### INTERVIEW

## INDICATOR OF A FREE SOCIETY

Interview with Robert Schlögl, President of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, and Robert Quinn, Executive Director of Scholars at Risk, on the global repression of researchers and the 10th anniversary of the Philipp Schwartz Initiative.



**Mr Quinn, current monitoring reports such as Free to Think and the Academic Freedom Index point to a decline in academic freedom worldwide. Are we seeing a global trend?**

● **Robert Quinn:** Clearly, yes. Both datasets show rising pressure on institutions and individuals as the long-standing tension between power and ideas intensifies in times of political, social, and technological uncertainty. And we are living in a time of overlapping uncertainty: climate stress, new geopolitical conflicts, migration pressures, economic inequalities, the aftermath of the pandemic, and now disruptive technologies like AI. These dynamics increase the impulse of some actors to suppress open inquiry – especially when questioning established authority becomes politically inconvenient.

**What do you think are the causes of these developments?**

● **Quinn:** The roots go back decades, but several contemporary forces have accelerated the trend. Whenever societies face instability, the tension between universities and the state tends to grow. Today, in an atmosphere of overlapping

uncertainty, there are two competing responses: Some people say, “This is complicated – let’s gather data and find solutions.” Others insist, “This is simple – let’s go back to how things were and stop listening to experts.” The latter sentiment fuels attacks on scientists, health professionals, social scientists, and humanists alike. These assaults are not just political reactions; they are emotional responses.

“  
*Threats travel faster.  
Researchers everywhere  
feel the precarity of academic  
freedom more directly.*

**Robert Schlögl, President of the  
Alexander von Humboldt Foundation**



**What kinds of threat do researchers face today?**

● *Quinn:* We see the full spectrum of threats — from mild harassment to imprisonment and even loss of life. Scholars at Risk focuses on the most severe cases: violence, persecution, and unjust imprisonment. Below that, there is targeted harassment — doxing, online abuse, intimidation, and sometimes physical danger. And even without direct attacks, the “chilling effect” is profound: fear, isolation, self-censorship. We see this even in countries that still consider themselves safe, such as the United States, where travel bans and political interference are growing. Ultimately, these threats don’t just harm individuals — they undermine universities’ ability to serve the public, to produce knowledge and to inform societal decision making.

**Where is the situation most worrying?**

● *Quinn:* Unfortunately, it affects every region. Our latest Free to Think report documents 395 attacks in 49 countries. That includes imprisonment, surveillance, and exile in conflict-affected states — but also legislative interference, ideological restrictions and public harassment in democratic societies. What has changed is public awareness: universities in Europe

or North America can no longer assume that their operating space is inherently secure. The pressure to delegitimise expertise and evidence-based debate is increasing in many democracies.

**Mr Schlögl, the Philipp Schwartz Initiative (PSI) was launched ten years ago to support scholars facing persecution. How has reality changed since then?**

● *Robert Schlögl:* The initiative was launched in 2015 — in response to developments in the Middle East, particularly in Syria. Since then, the geography of threats has expanded dramatically: Russia, Ukraine, Afghanistan — as have the crises that have produced systemic risk to large academic communities. What has also changed is our perception: threats travel faster. Social media ensures that fear spreads instantly; researchers everywhere feel the precarity of academic freedom more directly.

**The latest hotspot where academic freedom is under pressure is the U.S. Are researchers from the U.S. already submitting requests to PSI?**

● *Schlögl:* We have received one inquiry from the United States to date. I want to make that very clear: In Germany, there

“  
*Scholars are rarely attacked for the content of a physics formula or a medical discovery — they are attacked for the act of questioning.*

Robert Quinn, Executive Director of the Scholars at Risk Network

“

*Since the launch of the initiative, the geography of threats has expanded dramatically.*

Robert Schlögl

is sometimes a debate suggesting that the situation in Russia and the United States is somehow comparable when it comes to academic freedom. But they are clearly not. Despite all the concerns and discussions we have, the differences are vast.

**And then, of course, there is China, a country without academic freedom but with an enormous output from its science system. Isn’t that a contradiction?**

● *Schlögl:* China is a particularly interesting case because the restriction of academic freedom there is, in a way, tolerated within the system due to its sheer size. When I speak to people, they often don’t associate the impact of China’s serious problems with academic freedom. The sheer scale of scientific activity and opportunity means that the oppressive aspects — the notion that the Communist Party controls everything in science — are barely felt.

● *Quinn:* I would add that one must distinguish baseline freedom from visible incidents. In China, the baseline is already low. Fewer repressive events do not mean more freedom — they mean repression is working efficiently. Meanwhile, in places like the U.S., the baseline was high, but the direction of change is now negative and accelerating.

**We discussed regional differences. Are there also differences regarding research fields? Are certain research fields targeted particularly?**

● *Quinn:* It is a misconception that some disciplines are inherently “safe”. Scholars are rarely attacked for the content of a physics formula or a medical discovery — they are attacked for the act of questioning. Today, we see heightened risks in fields dealing with gender, identity, social justice, minority rights, and languages. These areas are used as political leverage points — not because of the research itself, but because it can be mobilised as a cultural symbol.

● *Schlögl:* Disciplines closer to political power or national security — molecular biology, nuclear physics, defence-related research — also attract attention. But the decisive factor is not the field; it is the proximity to contested issues. Where knowledge collides with ideology, risk arises.

**The Philipp Schwartz Initiative works closely with programmes such as Scholars at Risk and the Scholar Rescue Fund. How does this cooperation work?**

● *Schlögl:* It is foundational. PSI would not be effective without the international networks that identify and assess cases. Scholars at Risk provides expertise, early warning insights, and global advocacy networks. Our cooperation ranges from practical matters, such as assessing risks, to joint public engagement for academic freedom.

● *Quinn:* Collaboration is not just operational — it is strategic. The defence of academic freedom must ›



“  
The narrative must be:  
Universities serve society  
by helping it navigate  
uncertainty.

Robert Quinn

be transnational because threats are transnational. PSI is a cornerstone partner in that effort, including in European-level projects to safeguard academic space.

**In Germany, universities host PSI fellows. After ten years, would you like to highlight some of those that have been particularly helpful during this time?**

● **Schlögl:** No — and that is a strength. Over 140 universities and research institutions have hosted PSI fellows, so support is widely distributed. Nor do we experience institutional hesitation, such as “This is too risky or too political.” That is remarkable — and it is not guaranteed to remain so if political attitudes towards science shift.

**That’s exactly why many people discuss resilience in our German science system. What responsibility do scientific institutions, but also politicians bear in countering scepticism and hostility?**

● **Quinn:** Universities have a responsibility to articulate what academic freedom is and why it matters. Not in abstract constitutional terms — but as something intimately connected to the quality of everyday public life. The narrative cannot be: “Support us because we are important.” The narrative must be: “We serve society by helping it navigate uncertainty.” And that service sometimes requires courage.

● **Schlögl:** In Germany, I see a political trend to treat science as optional —

**ROBERT QUINN** is a lawyer, co-founder and Executive Director of the international Scholars at Risk Network (SAR), based at New York University. More than 600 academic institutions in over 45 countries belong to SAR.

**ROBERT SCHLÖGL** has been President of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation since 2023. A chemist and internationally recognised expert on green energy and the energy systems of the future, he was previously director of the Fritz Haber Institute in Berlin.



This interview was conducted by Table.Briefings editor, **TIM GABEL**, and originally appeared in *Research.Table*.

something to fund if resources permit. Some politicians have the impression that we need to pay more attention to defence and social issues. But science is not “nice to have” or a luxury. It’s the baseline of a living society. This development is dangerous. Freedom of science is the indicator of freedom of society. When that indicator is weakened, society loses its orientation.

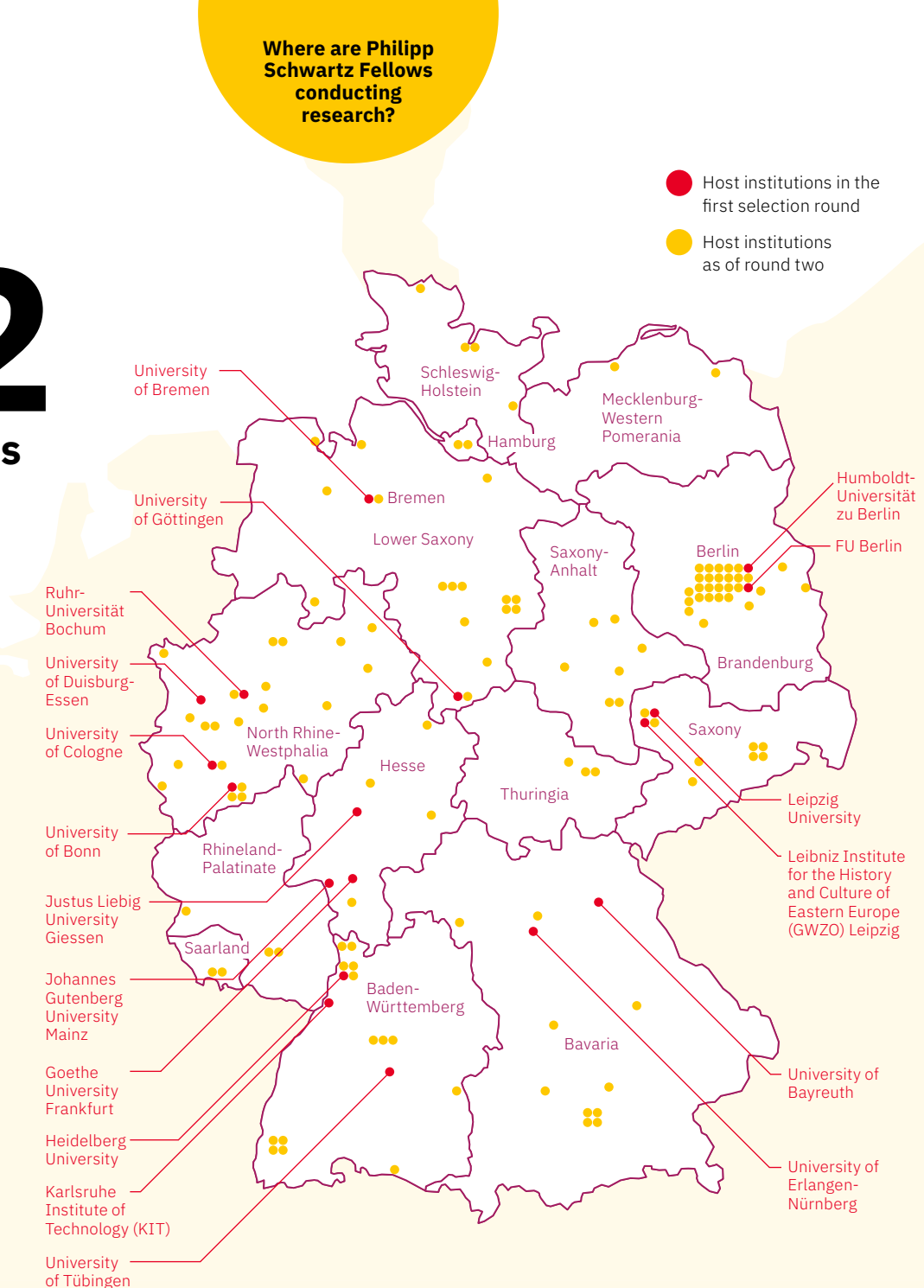
**Finally, let’s look ten years into the future. What would it take to achieve a renaissance of academic freedom?**

● **Quinn:** The most important factor is visible support for those under threat. Protecting targeted scholars gives others courage, while abandoning them spreads fear. Academic freedom needs legal safeguards, strong institutions, and cultural legitimacy — but above all, people who dare to think. I strongly endorse the idea of renaissance, not just for higher education but for humanity guided by the ideals of truth, beauty, culture, and dignity. Universities must help society navigate complexity and defend nuance in a world where media and technology often undermine it. Programmes like PSI are vital because they save lives — and they sustain the courage others need to keep thinking freely.

● **Schlögl:** And scientists must embody confidence. We should not retreat into cynicism or defensive self-justification. Science can model how to live constructively with complexity and disagreement. If we communicate that — not only through policy papers, but through human example — society will rediscover why it needs us. ●

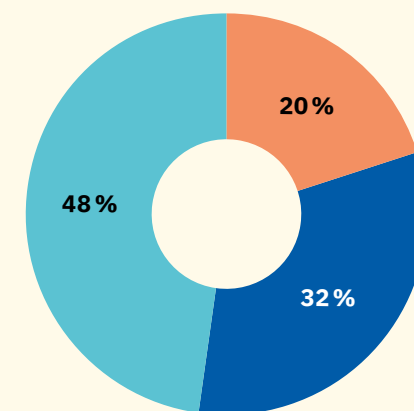
## From 18 to 142 host institutions in ten years

In the first application round in 2016, 18 host institutions were selected — now there are 142 across the whole of Germany. The universities, institutions of higher education and other research institutions receive PSI funding to finance fellowships for foreign researchers for two years. For this purpose, they nominate researchers who are demonstrably at risk — submitting a concept for how best to integrate the nominees.



**Type of institution**  
in the whole of Germany

- Universities
- Institutions of higher education  
For example, for applied sciences, technical universities and Fachhochschulen
- Other research institutions



602

academic hosts and mentors  
advise and support fellows,

76 of them act as mentors  
for 2 to 5 PSI Fellows.



# Knowledge is the greatest asset

I recently had the opportunity to look at some papers from the estate of Philipp Schwartz. They included a small booklet entitled “Notgemeinschaft”. In the preface to the brochure, Schwartz describes the day before he fled Frankfurt: “On 23 March 1933, a Monday morning, I bumped into my colleague A.W. Fischer (...) in the garden of the Municipal Hospital in Frankfurt am Main. He was very concerned and asked me why I hadn’t ‘gone on a trip yet’. I should leave immediately, otherwise I would be arrested. (...) I was ready to go.” A few days before, the police had searched Schwartz’s house, supposedly looking for machine guns.

Schwartz was a pathologist, the youngest professor in Germany at the time, who taught at the University of Frankfurt. He was also Jewish. For the National Socialist regime in Germany this was reason enough to drive him into exile. He initially stayed with relatives in Zurich from where he observed the situation in Germany: “And then, every day, there were these dreadful reports about suspensions, expulsions, arrests, ill treatment and suicides of university staff all over Germany. As early as the beginning of April, one encountered colleagues everywhere in Zurich who would normally have been fulfilling their teaching commitments in Frankfurt am Main, Berlin or Würzburg. (...) We had to try to stem the panic and get organised.”

Schwartz founded the Emergency Society of German Scholars Abroad, an association of more than a thousand German university staff who had been persecuted and displaced by the National Socialists. It supported researchers

Foreign Minister  
Johann Wadepuhl  
on the Philipp  
Schwartz Initiative



“

*Academic freedom quite  
rightly enjoys constitutional  
status in Germany.*

who had fled Germany, found them jobs, gave them prospects. Ernst Reuter, amongst others, had the Emergency Society to thank for his emigration to Turkey. Alongside his research, it became Schwartz’s life’s work to enable persecuted scholars to conduct their research in freedom.

#### SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Against the backdrop of our history, I believe we Germans have a very special responsibility. We want to assume this responsibility and see it as our duty to honour people like Philipp Schwartz and, in a certain way, to continue their work, as we are currently living in a world in which systemic attacks on scientific freedom are increasing – in Europe, too, by the way, and in the transatlantic area. Freedom of science quite rightly enjoys constitutional protection in Germany and is an important principle of our international university and academic cooperation. This is why, ten years ago, the Federal Foreign Office sent a clear message and established the Philipp Schwartz Initiative (PSI), a German protection programme for international researchers at risk.

Together with the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, our initiative enables German institutions of higher education, universities and research

institutes to host international researchers who are threatened by war or persecution in their own countries for a certain period of time. This is not only of benefit to academic life in Germany and to the country as a location for research, but is also designed to ensure that the researchers continue to be members of the global scientific community and are able to pursue their research and network with others. Over the past ten years, more than 600 fellows from over 30 countries have been sponsored both in the regular programme, as well as in special programmes for Afghanistan, Iran and Ukraine.

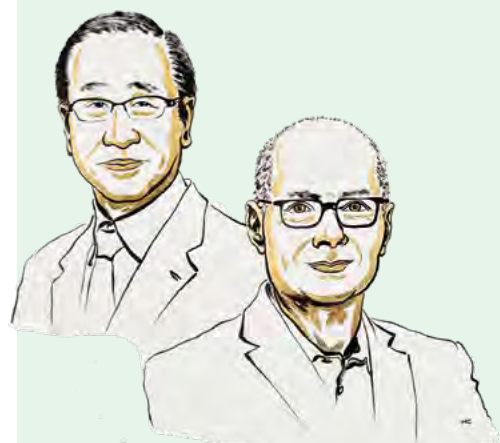
I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for its enormous commitment, which makes a crucial difference to defending scientific freedom. Just how important this initiative is, becomes clear when we take a look at the fates of the sponsorship recipients, for example,

the Afghan legal scholar Suhailah Akbari, who was immediately threatened when the Taliban seized power in 2021 and had to flee the country with her two daughters. After days of uncertainty and fear at Kabul Airport, she managed to escape to Germany with German assistance. As a Philipp Schwartz Fellow at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin she has been able to resume her research on the legal framework for climate policy and trade in clean energy, in other words, on forward-looking topics that will be needed for a hopefully more stable Afghanistan in the future, as returning and helping to build the social and economic stability of the countries involved are fundamental principles of the initiative.

#### ACTIVELY PROTECT AND PROMOTE

At the end of his life, Philipp Schwartz also thought about the future: “Let us try to show our successors in the coming generations that during one of the darkest periods in history and contrary to the intentions of the German destroyers, new ideas and achievements whose roots were to be found in German soil significantly paved the way for a happy future.” I wish all the fellows and alumni of the Philipp Schwartz Initiative a happy future. We want to play a role in preserving their ideas and achievements and in helping them to continue developing their potential in a safe environment. We know what efforts they have had to make and continue making every day. Knowledge is the greatest asset in our societies. Let us not waste it, but instead actively protect and promote it. ●





## CHEMISTS HONOURED

## Nobel Prizes for Humboldtians

The Humboldtians, Susumu Kitagawa and Omar M. Yaghi, have been awarded the 2025 Nobel Prize in Chemistry together with Richard Robson. The researchers have been recognised for their development of metal-organic frameworks (MOF). Sixty-three researchers in the worldwide Humboldt Network have now received Nobel Prizes.

The chemist, Susumu Kitagawa, is the director of the Institute for Integrated Cell-Material Sciences at Kyoto University, Japan. In 2008, he was granted a Humboldt Research Award and spent time conducting research, amongst others, at Ruhr-Universität Bochum and Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT). Omar M. Yaghi is a professor of chemistry at the University of California in Berkeley, United States. He received a Humboldt Research Award in 2022 and used it for research collaboration with TU Berlin.



[www.humboldt-foundation.de/k117-01](http://www.humboldt-foundation.de/k117-01)



All current topics at  
[www.humboldt-foundation.de/en/newsroom](http://www.humboldt-foundation.de/en/newsroom)

## GLOBAL MINDS INITIATIVE

## Signal for open science

The Humboldt Foundation is part of the new Global Minds Initiative Germany launched by the Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR) in summer 2025. The programme addresses international researchers at various stages of qualification who wish to continue their academic careers by spending time in Germany. It builds on the portfolios of both the Humboldt Foundation and the German Research Foundation (DFG) as well as the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) with regard to students and doctoral candidates.

The initiative is the BMFTR's response to the increasing restrictions experienced by international scientists and scholars in their research. "We are providing impetus that will have an impact within our scientific system and far beyond: freedom has a place here. Excellence and achievement have a place here,"

said Federal Research Minister, Dorothee Bär, at the launch of the programme.

The additional funding through the Global Minds Initiative allows the Humboldt Foundation to grant additional fellowships to top international

researchers in the context of existing funding lines in response to huge demand from abroad and a record-breaking number of outstanding applications.

The Foundation's President, Robert Schlögl, welcomes the initiative, "It is to be hoped the programme will also drive global knowledge production. Topics like health or climate research can't wait and must be considered in a broader context. To do that, we need internationally connected science."

Already in October 2025, the Foundation was able to welcome its first sponsorship recipients. Initially, more than 130 additional Humboldt Research Fellowships and 20 Humboldt and Bessel Research Awards will be granted up to the end of the year. Moreover, the Humboldt Foundation plans to expand its Global Minds Initiative portfolio.



For additional information about the initiative as well as the application and nomination opportunities, visit  
[www.humboldt-foundation.de/k117-02](http://www.humboldt-foundation.de/k117-02)



## PERSONNEL MATTERS

## Foundation under new management



Heading head office: Markus Zanner (r.), the Foundation's new Secretary General, and Katrin Amian, Deputy Secretary General

In May 2025, the science manager and historian, Markus Zanner, became the new Secretary General of the Humboldt Foundation. And in October, the American studies scholar, Katrin Amian, became his deputy. Together, they now head the Foundation's headquarters with more than 290 staff in Bonn and Berlin.

Zanner, born in Weiden in the Upper Palatinate in 1967, read history, religious studies and romance studies at the University of Regensburg and spent a year at the Universidad Nacional de Misiones in Argentina. Following professional appointments at

the Technical University of Munich, where, amongst others, he was Managing Director of the TUM Institute for Advanced Study, he held the position of Kanzler (Vice President for Administration and Finance) of the University of Bayreuth from 2011 until 2021, subsequently becoming Kanzler of the newly-founded University of Technology Nuremberg (UTN).

Born in Aachen in 1977, Katrin Amian, read North American Regional Science at the University of Bonn and spent time studying in the United States at the University of Notre Dame and the University of California, Berkeley. After finishing her doctorate, she initially worked for the Chair of North American Studies at the University of Bonn, transferring to the Humboldt Foundation in 2007. In 2008, she became head of the Foundation's North America, Australia, New Zealand, Oceania Division and from 2021, also deputy head of the Sponsorship and Network Department.

Zanner and Amian have succeeded Enno Aufderheide and Thomas Hesse who had previously headed the Foundation for eleven years. Aufderheide retired as Secretary General back in April 2024; the deputy Secretary General, Thomas Hesse, managed the Foundation on an interim basis until Markus Zanner took office. At the end of July 2025, Hesse also retired – after more than 30 years of service to the Foundation.



[www.humboldt-foundation.de/k117-03](http://www.humboldt-foundation.de/k117-03)

## AGREEMENT

## Re-assessing research

The Humboldt Foundation has joined the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA). CoARA is campaigning internationally to reform the assessment and evaluation of scientific performance and include more qualitative aspects, as well. The aim is to give greater recognition to the broad spectrum of contributions made by researchers.

More than 700 research institutions in over 50 countries have become members of CoARA and have signed the agreement, co-initiated by the European Commission, to reform research assessment. By joining,

the Foundation is aiming to play an active role in shaping both the conversation at European and international level as well as the respective general conditions. At the same time, exchange within the network provides an opportunity to continue developing the Foundation's own concept of quality and its implications for selection, sponsorship and networking.



[www.humboldt-foundation.de/k117-04](http://www.humboldt-foundation.de/k117-04)



# IN THE JUNGLE OF DECISIONS

How do group-living animals make joint decisions? Who leads, who follows – and why? The behavioural ecologist and Humboldt Professor Meg Crofoot deciphers the complex interactions in animal societies – and, in doing so, brings us a step closer to understanding human nature.

TEXT MARLENE HALSER

Kenya: A male olive baboon in the crown of a fever tree.

It is often still dark when Meg Crofoot sets off in the morning. “In Panama my day usually starts at four o’clock in the morning,” the US-American behavioural researcher explains. In her rucksack she packs her equipment, water and some snacks. Then off she goes: on foot through dense jungle on the search for the groups of monkeys she is currently studying. In Panama these are either capuchins or spider monkeys, which means excellent climbers who move around almost exclusively in the treetops.

“When we find them, my team and I effectively spend the whole day chasing after them,” says Crofoot, laughing. The terrain is hilly, the air tropical, humid and warm. “It’s physically exhausting, you sweat and get loads of ticks but it’s a lot of fun.” Both species of monkey are very social with a lot of interaction within the group. “It’s almost like a soap opera that you can watch live,” she says. “Power struggles, jealousy, tantrums, tricks: you get it all.” But what really interests Crofoot are the decisions the monkeys make as a group – and how they come about.

Meg Crofoot became an Alexander von Humboldt Professor in 2019 and heads the Department for the Ecology of Animal Societies at the Max Planck Institute of Animal Behaviour in Konstanz. The professorship is Germany’s most valuable international research award and attracts top researchers to German universities from all over the world. “At Konstanz we investigate animal societies, that is, groups of mammals for whose members belonging to a group plays a vital role,” Crofoot explains. So, not swarms of fish or birds which have often been the focus of collective behavioural biology in the past.

## REAL-TIME ANALYSIS

The Konstanz researchers collect their data during field trips and immediately transfer them to the Movebank database which can also be accessed by the members of the team back at the institute. There, the animals’ movement patterns and behaviour are effectively analysed in real time and the results fed back to the researchers in the field. This means that, where necessary, data collection and methodology can also be adapted on an ad hoc basis.

“It used to be thought that groups of animals were homogenous with all the members having



**MEG CROFOOT** is the Director of the Department for the Ecology of Animal Societies at the Max Planck Institute of Animal Behaviour and an Alexander von Humboldt Professor at the University of Konstanz. In 2022, the behavioural ecologist and evolutionary anthropologist was awarded an ERC Consolidator Grant.

“  
*It’s all about understanding how humans have become such unusual apes.*

equal relationships,” says Crofoot. But this is now considered outdated. “In the animal societies we study, each of the individuals has different needs and abilities as well as differing degrees of influence and power, which produces asymmetries.” She wants to discover how social relationships need to be constructed so that animals can work together successfully in a group. How decisions are made, she says, is key.

“Of course, the object of all this is also to understand how humans have become such unusual apes,” says Crofoot, laughing once again. “Because that’s precisely what we are, extremely unusual apes.” Hovering behind this is a philosophical question: who are we as a species? “In our research we try to address this issue using modern technology,” says >

Photos: Christian Ziegler/Max Planck Institute of Animal Behavior





Using radio telemetry, Meg Crofoot searches Panama's dense rainforest for animals equipped with tracking collars.

the 45-year-old. "I've always been very interested in what individuals can do when they get together in groups."

Crofoot's job is a childhood dream come true. She grew up in the US state of Maine, on the border with Canada. "My parents didn't want me to watch commercial television, so I probably saw far too many animal documentaries," she says. As a teenager the idea of becoming an animal researcher took a back seat. "When I started uni, I wanted to work for USAID," she notes; that is, in development aid: do good, travel, learn languages. She enrolled at Stanford to study human biology. "But given the current state of the world I am pretty glad I didn't go for development aid otherwise I'd probably be out of a job by now," she adds. USAID was wound up by the US government under President Trump in 2025.

It was only while she was at university that Crofoot realised that her childhood dream of becoming an animal scientist could be made into a genuine career. After completing a BA in behavioural biology at Stanford, she moved to Harvard in 2001 to do a Master's in anthropology. For her doctorate she studied the competitive behaviour of white-faced capuchins in Panama. "In the field the rival groups of capuchins were constantly involved in aggressive altercations but still lived peacefully next to small groups, as though there were a tacit balance of power,"

Crofoot explains. "I wanted to understand how that could be when one group was clearly in the majority. Why didn't they attack?"

#### THE MAJORITY DECIDES

As it was difficult to record herd behaviour with the naked eye, she started collecting movement data using remote sensing technology, that is, the precursor of GPS trackers. "That gave us completely new insights," says Crofoot, such as the fact that the smaller group had a strong home advantage. Even when they were in the minority, the animals did their utmost to defend their territory against the larger group. "Nobody runs away or cheats." By contrast, the number of deserters from the larger group moving outside of their own territory was much higher. This ultimately leads to a balance of power.

Her doctorate was the first project in which she combined participatory observation with data technology – a pioneering achievement in her subject. "For us, these new technologies were as important as the microscope is for microbiology," says Crofoot. "They reveal dynamics you can't see with the naked eye."

As capuchins are difficult to catch, Crofoot also investigated baboons – changing location from Panama to Kenya. "Baboons are highly motivated by food, so they often simply walk into cage traps," she

Aggressive confrontations with rivals are the order of the day amongst white-faced capuchins.

Field course at Mpala Research Centre in Kenya: local and international students receive instruction in quantitative behavioural research.



says. "It's much easier to capture the animals securely to fit trackers to them without harming them."

In Kenya, Crofoot and her team use a jeep to follow the baboons they have fitted with collars. They record data on speed and direction of movement as well as vocalisations and combine them with weather and environmental data. Every evening, the researchers approach the baboons to wirelessly download the data stored in the collars and transfer it to the database. This produces a comprehensive picture which has already led to a surprising finding: although groups of baboons are hierarchically organised, the majority decides on the direction. "Not even the highest-ranking male baboon dictates which route the group should take," says Crofoot. "It is a democratic decision-making process." Perhaps, she suspects, because the alpha male is not necessarily the most experienced.

In her current project Crofoot is investigating the collective sleep behaviour of baboons: How is the right tree for the night chosen? When to sleep? When

to get up? Who sleeps next to whom? What happens if a leopard climbs the tree during the night? "Conflicts arise amongst baboons when it comes to reconciling individual interests with the interests of the group – just like with humans," says Crofoot. "So, we are looking at issues that also touch on the core of our everyday conflicts and tensions."

In Crofoot's institute in Konstanz her colleagues study the group behaviour of other species, too, such as the hunting behaviour of social carnivores like lions and hyenas that live in groups, packs or families and often hunt collaboratively. Or decision-making by bats. "The aim at some stage is to understand the universally applicable rules that determine animals' social behaviour," says Crofoot. To do so, comparative data on many species are required – a project that can only succeed on the basis of cooperation.

Promoting junior researchers, especially from the Global South, by including them in these efforts, is something Crofoot takes for granted. To this end, she is active as a scout in the Humboldt Foundation's Henriette Herz Scouting Programme and recruits new junior researchers for the Foundation's network. "Talent is equally distributed throughout the entire world," says Crofoot, "but opportunities and resources are not." Currently, there are postdocs from Brazil, Madagascar and Uganda working at her institute. ➤

“  
*The students cooperate during reciprocal visits and benefit in practical ways from the knowledge and experience of the others.*

**Meg Crofoot on her project to promote junior researchers**



Group dynamics: Meg Crofoot and her team investigate the herd behaviour of baboons in Kenya.



“The sponsorship-recipients’ projects, research questions and perspectives upgrade our research group in Konstanz enormously.”

Moreover, in 2025, she utilised funding from her Humboldt Professorship to initiate an exchange programme for Master’s students from Germany and Kenya. “The students visit each other and cooperate both in the lecture theatre and in the field,” says Crofoot. “They can benefit in practical ways from the knowledge and experience of the others.”

#### DISMAY AT US SCIENCE POLICY

The fact that, in the meantime, her own country, the United States, does not always offer good conditions for science is something Crofoot has been observing with growing dismay. “It is absolutely terrible – for young researchers as well as established colleagues in the US who have to see their life’s work being put at risk,” says Crofoot, referring to the cuts in

funding introduced by the Trump administration, the diversity programmes that have been discontinued and the threats to critical researchers. At the same time, she also fears the global consequences of the United States’ science policy: “After all, science is the way we explain the world and try to make it better,” she emphasises.

Which means, she notes, that research outside the US is even more important. “In times like these, the fact that Germany has enshrined the freedom of science and research in its constitution sends a particularly important signal,” says Crofoot. Politically independent sponsorship programmes, like those offered by the Humboldt Foundation, were essential. “The Humboldt Professorship gives me the opportunity to conduct research for the sake of research,” she says. “Developments in the US show that this is not self-evident and therefore cannot be valued highly enough.” •

Photo: Christian Ziegler/Max Planck Institute of Animal Behavior

Photos: private

# THE COINCIDENCE OF A LIFETIME

Fifty years, one common path:  
a look back on our  
eventful life in academia.



Born in 1944, the Romanian neurobiologist **Luisa Flonta** discovered the insulin cell receptors during her Humboldt Research Fellowship at the Munich Institute of Diabetes Research in 1972. Like her husband, **Mircea Flonta**, a philosophy professor emeritus at the University of Bucharest, who was born in 1932, she is a member of the Romanian Academy. Both remain closely connected to the Foundation as members of the alumni association, the Humboldt Club Romania.



The coincidence of a lifetime occurred in the spring of 1972 at the reception of a hotel in Nuremberg. A colleague introduced us. We were both taking part in the study tour the Humboldt Foundation offers its sponsorship recipients during their research stay. Mircea had joined at short notice when a place had become available. We had no idea what would follow.

On the coach, we sat next to each other, discussed our subjects and found lots to talk about. We discovered that we both had Humboldt Fellowships in Munich, Mircea in the Philosophy Department at LMU, whilst I was a biologist, physiologist and neuroscientist at the Munich Institute of Diabetes Research. And we both came from the same university in Bucharest although we had never met there.

So, it was pure coincidence that we met. We spent our spare time during the research stay in Munich travelling, drove all over Europe. We wanted to make the most of that freedom because back in Romania, the Communist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu was in power and it wasn’t so easy to get a passport.

For Mircea, the fellowship was a turning-point and a huge career opportunity. When he first went to university in Romania, political cleansing was practised, and it was hardly possible to work professionally. I, too, was shaped by the time I spent in Munich. I would have liked to stay longer but the authorities called me back.

In 1974, we were both back in Romania, got married and had three sons. We both continued working in academia. In the mid-1990s, I set up the Master’s course in neurobiology at the University of Bucharest where I still hold lectures to this day. Mircea also lectures in philosophy. It is a gift from heaven still to be active at our age.

We still often talk about academic issues – such as whether there is such a thing as free will. From the neuroscience point of view, thoughts and emotions are determined by the brain – philosophers look at it somewhat differently. So, we always have plenty to discuss. Just as we did on the coach during the Humboldt study tour in 1972. •

Recorded by **ESTHER SAMBALE**



# 10 YEARS OF THE PHILIPP SCHWARTZ INITIATIVE

## Was hoffen und wünschen Sie für die Zukunft von Wissenschaftsfreiheit weltweit und den Schutz gefährdeter Forschender?

### What are your hopes and wishes for the future of academic freedom worldwide and the protection of researchers at risk?



*The Philipp Schwartz Initiative has been the flagship initiative for academic freedom over the past decade. My hope is that it continues to inspire the world by protecting scholars at risk and offering help precisely when academics need it most.*

*Die Philipp Schwartz-Initiative war in den letzten zehn Jahren die Vorzeiginitiative für Wissenschaftsfreiheit. Ich hoffe, dass sie die Welt weiterhin inspiriert – indem sie gefährdete Forschende schützt und genau dann unterstützt, wenn Hilfe am dringendsten gebraucht wird.*

The Turkish political scientist **Hakki Taş** joined the University of Bremen in 2017 as a Philipp Schwartz Fellow. Today, he is a postdoctoral fellow at GIGA Hamburg.

The Iranian theatre scholar **Azadeh Ganjeh** is a professor at Hochschule für Künste im Sozialen in Ottersberg. From 2022 until 2025, she was a Philipp Schwartz Fellow in Hildesheim.

*Let us not only wish but demand that institutions like the PSI be secured and strengthened. Academic freedom is not a privilege for scholars; it's a public concern. Research shapes our understanding of the world – for the common good, not for power.*

*Wir sollten nicht nur wünschen, sondern fordern, dass Institutionen wie die PSI gesichert und gestärkt werden. Akademische Freiheit ist von öffentlichem Interesse, kein Privileg für Forschende. Wissenschaft prägt unser Verständnis der Welt – zum Wohle aller, nicht zum Zwecke der Macht.*

*German universities will remain a safe space for excellent research and academic careers, where individuals collaborate in a spirit of trust to achieve forward-looking scientific outcomes.*

*Hochschulen in Deutschland werden auch in Zukunft ein sicherer Ort für exzellente Forschung und Wissenschaftskarrieren sein, an dem Menschen mit dem gemeinsamen Ziel zukunftsweisender Forschungsergebnisse vertrauensvoll zusammenarbeiten.*

The Belarusian philosopher **Olga Shparaga** has been a Philipp Schwartz Fellow at FernUniversität Hagen since 2025.

*Ich verknüpfe meine Hoffnungen auf Wissenschaftsfreiheit und den Schutz gefährdeter Forschender mit dem Überleben der Demokratie. So wie freie Forschung ohne Demokratie nicht existieren kann, so kann auch Demokratie nicht ohne Wissenschaftler\*innen bestehen, die frei denken, publizieren und sich äußern können.*

*Today, I associate my greatest hopes for academic freedom and the protection of researchers in danger with the survival of democracy itself. Just as free research cannot exist without democracy, so democracy cannot exist without scientists, including women, who have real opportunities to think, publish, and speak publicly.*

*For ten years, the Gerda Henkel Foundation has stood alongside the Philipp Schwartz Initiative. As academic freedom and protection from persecution should remain shared goals, we will continue to advocate for the many scholars at risk.*

*Seit 10 Jahren steht unsere Stiftung an der Seite der PSL. Akademische Freiheit und Schutz vor Verfolgung sollten weiterhin gemeinsame Ziele von privaten Stiftungen und öffentlicher Hand bleiben. Dafür wollen wir uns auch künftig stark machen.*

**Birte Ruhardt** leitet seit 2019 das Vorstandsbüro der Gerda Henkel Stiftung, die zu den privaten Mittelgebern der PSI der ersten Stunde zählt. Ruhardt verantwortet unter anderem die Zusammenarbeit mit der Philipp Schwartz-Initiative.

**Angela Ittel** ist Präsidentin der TU Braunschweig und Vizepräsidentin für Internationales, Gleichstellung und Diversität der Hochschule. Sie begleitet die PSI als Mitglied des Auswahlausschusses.

Photos: Marie Konrad (Ganjen), GIGA (Taş), Gerda Henkel Stiftung (Ruhardt), FernUniversität Hagen (Shparaga), HRK / David Auberhofer (Ittel)