President Schlögl,
fellow Members of the German Bundestag,
Excellencies,
esteed hosts from the Humboldt Network,
and, above all, distinguished Humboldtians,

I am delighted to be able to welcome you to the Annual Meeting of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation on behalf of the Federal Foreign Office.

The Federal Foreign Office is primarily associated with addressing foreign-policy issues and, in light of global crises and conflicts, with crisis diplomacy. But cultural relations and education policy, too, has been firmly embedded in our foreign policy for decades.

Our intermediary organisations such as the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation have an established and quite essential role and receive funding from the Federal Foreign Office’s budget. And for good reason.

With its efforts in support of education, academia and research, the Foundation makes a crucial contribution to our comprehensive foreign-policy work.

Research and academia involve international exchange. They connect people and open channels of communication. This is the only way that research can be successful and find solutions for the global challenges that we face.

As President Schlögl has said, those of you who are here today represent 70 countries from Egypt to Vietnam.

You work at 88 different German research institutes, enriching the world of research with your contributions and ideas.

Whether you come from the Sudan, China, Ukraine or the US; whether you are here because you won a research scholarship or an International Climate Protection Fellowship or a Humboldt Award; you, distinguished Humboldtians, bring to life the idea of science diplomacy and set things in motion.

I bid you and your families a warm welcome – not only to this Annual Meeting, but also to Germany. We are pleased to have you here.

Without you, Germany and our relations with many countries and societies in this world would be all the poorer.

In democratic societies, foreign policy has long since ceased to be defined by traditional diplomacy and governments alone.
It is the relations between people and societies that form a solid and lasting foundation for stable international relations, global understanding and partnerships. And so research cooperation and dialogue, as promoted by this Foundation, are becoming more and more significant, particularly in times of crisis. Nations and societies have been confronted with tremendous challenges in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic, Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, the war in Gaza, or the war in the Sudan, which has created almost 11 million refugees – causing the largest displacement crisis in the world. The number of armed conflicts worldwide has almost doubled over the last decade. Meanwhile, authoritarianism and populism are increasingly jeopardising democracies and also putting a strain on relations in research and academia. And that’s not all – the climate crisis represents one of the greatest risks to our security. Its repercussions are fuelling conflicts and triggering flows of refugees. But no intergovernmental agreement in the world will be enough to resolve these global challenges on its own. We need people who build bridges and look for solutions together. We need international research cooperation in order to develop shared prospects for the future. 

With the 30,000 members of the Humboldt Network, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation makes a crucial contribution to building, maintaining and expanding valuable connections between Germany and the world. The Network has no equal anywhere else and is a beacon of our cultural relations and education policy. I would like to take the opportunity to sincerely thank the Foundation for this. Allow me to mention just two examples of your many efforts that enrich our foreign policy. The Cameroonian Humboldt member Professor David Simo, an expert in German Studies, served as co-editor of the anthology Das Auswärtige Amt und die Kolonien (The Foreign Office and the Colonies), giving a major boost to our efforts to address our colonial past. The Foreign Office played a central role in planning and carrying out the injustice and violence of German colonial policy. It is good to improve our understanding of this role. Because only when we know the past can we throw off colonial ways of thinking and shape the future together with our partners in the former colonies. I would have liked to take this opportunity to welcome Professor Evelyn Fogwe, too, but she was unfortunately unable to join us here as planned. She is a linguist and a winner of the Humboldt Alumni Award for Innovative Networking Initiatives in recognition of a network that she founded in Cameroon to help more women enter top roles in academia. More rights and representation for women and marginalised groups, not least in academia and research, is part of our overarching approach of feminist foreign policy.
Ladies and gentlemen,
You know better than I do that academia brings people together and transcends borders.
But especially in an increasingly complex world, these relationships only work when rules are followed and shared values are safeguarded.
Germany is committed to the UN Charter, to upholding international law, to the freedom of the press, freedom of opinion and academic freedom.
Our science diplomacy is embedded in foreign policy that is guided by values and interests – and that also takes security interests into account.
In the fields of cybersecurity and dual use in particular, these security interests must be protected.
This means, for all of us, carefully weighing the balance between academic freedom and security interests.
At the same time, it is important for academia to promote freedom and for us to use it for and not against people.
And yet we are concerned to see that academic freedom is being increasingly restricted in many countries of the world.
The growing number of researchers who hope to have their work supported in Germany through the Philipp Schwartz Initiative, the Foundation's protection programme, is a sad reflection of this fact.
As a consequence, the Philipp Schwartz Initiative is more necessary than ever, and it can rely on our continued support.
We want it to keep making an impact and creating spaces for academia and research.

In this connection, we all have a responsibility to bear.
Respect is earned by clearly stating one's own values.
And so I appeal to you to take a clear stance, including when confronted with illiberal positions.

Distinguished Humboldtians,
It is wonderful to put a face – so many faces – to the abstract concept of cultural relations and education policy, thanks to your presence here today.
You have all demonstrated outstanding work as researchers.
But you are also here today because you are open to international exchange, because you seek dialogue.
For this you have my thanks. I hope that you enjoy an exciting and inspiring Annual Meeting.
And I hope that you and your families will have positive experiences in Germany and will always feel a connection to our country and its people.
Please do be critical of us, too.
Your outside perspective is important to us.
Help us so that we can learn from one another and together make our world a little better.
Because talking to one another is always essential in order to pursue foreign policy in a spirit of trust and mutual understanding – of peace and partnership.
Thank you very much.