The Russian invasion of Ukraine: a humanitarian tragedy and a tragedy for science

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In the eyes of the civilized world, Russia has already lost the war: politically, it is becoming ever more isolated; economically as the sanctions take an enormous toll; militarily as the losses of the Russian army mount. In contrast, the courage of Ukrainian people fighting for their independence has united the Western world that is providing enormous support for those Ukrainians who fight the Russian invasion and those who have fled their war-torn country. Once this war is over, Ukraine will have to heal the wounds of war, reunite families, restore its economy, reestablish infrastructure, and rebuild science and education. Russia will have to restore its dignity and overcome its self-inflicted isolation.

Europe’s unity in condemning Russia’s war of aggression and showing its solidarity with Ukraine has been impressive. This includes not the least welcoming and accommodating millions of refugees. We, the scientific community in Europe, have a moral obligation to help Ukrainian students and colleagues by providing safe space to study and to continue their research. First, European research organizations and funding agencies should develop strategies to support them in the years to come. Second, efforts by EMBO, research funders, universities, and research institutions to support Ukrainian students and scientists are necessary. As a first priority, dedicated and unbureaucratic short-term scholarship and grant programs are required to accommodate Ukrainian scientists; such programs have been already initiated by many organizations, for example, by EMBO, Volkswagen Stiftung, Max Planck Society, and the ERC among others. These help Ukrainian scientists to stay connected to research and become integrated into the European research landscape. In the long-term and after the war, this aid should be complemented by funding for research centers of excellence in Ukraine, to which scientists could then return.

Even though the priority must be to help Ukrainians, we must also think of students and colleagues in Russia who oppose the war and are affected by the sanctions. As the Iron Curtain closes again, we have to think differently about our ongoing and future collaborations. Although freezing most, if not all, research collaborations with official Russian organizations is justified, it would be a mistake to extend these sanctions to all scientists and students. There is already an exodus of Russian and Belarusian scholars, which will only accelerate in the next months and years, and accepting scientists who ask for political asylum will be beneficial for Europe.

The fraction of Russian society in open opposition to the war is, unfortunately, smaller than that officially in support of it. At the beginning of the war, a number of Russian scientists published an open letter on the internet, in which they condemn this war (https://t-invariant.org/2022/02/we-are-against-war/). They clearly state that “The responsibility for unleashing a new war in Europe lies entirely with Russia. There is no rational justification for this war”, and “demand an immediate halt to all military operations directed against Ukraine”. At the same time, other prominent Russian science and education officials signed the “Statement of the Russian Union of University Rectors (Provosts)”, which expressed unwavering support for Russia, its president and its Army and their goal to “to achieve demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine and thus to defend ourselves from the ever-growing military threat” (https://www.rsr-online.ru/news/2022-god/obraschenie-rossiyskogo-soyuza-rektorov1/).

Inevitably, Russian scientists must decide themselves how to live and continue their scientific work under the increasingly tight surveillance of the Kremlin regime. History is repeating itself. Not long ago, during the Cold War, Soviet scientists were largely isolated from the international research community and worked in government-controlled research. In some fields, no one knew what they were working on or where. However, even in those dark times, courageous individuals such as Andrei Sakharov spoke out against the regime and tried to educate the next generation about the importance of free will. Many Soviet geneticists had been arrested under Stalin’s regime of terror and as a result of Lysenkoism and were executed or sent to the Gulag or had to emigrate, such as Nikolai Timofeev-Resovsky, one of the great geneticists of his time and an opponent of communism. As a result of sending dissident scientists to Siberia, great educational institutions were created in the region, which trained many famous scientists. History tells us that it is impossible to kill free will and the search for truth.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a major humanitarian tragedy and a tragedy for science at many levels. Our hope is that the European science community, policymakers, and funders will be prepared to continue and expand support for our colleagues from Ukraine and eventually help to rebuild...
the bridges with Russian science that have been torn down.

This commentary has been endorsed and signed by the EMBO Young Investigators and former Young Investigators listed below.

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