

Global inequalities in the academic world: Researchers under threat

Session organized by BICC at the
Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum 2018

CONFERENCE DOCUMENTATION

Susanne Heinke (Ed.) \ BICC



SUMMARY

BICC partnered with Germany's international broadcaster Deutsche Welle and hosted a session at the Global Media Forum 2018 "Global Inequalities" in Bonn, Germany. BICC's session "Global inequalities in the academic world: Researchers under threat" took place on 12 June 2018.

The session first drew attention to the challenges faced by academics in some extremely disabling and threatening environments. Hafiz Boboyorov (Tajikistan) and Cuneyt Gurer (Turkey) shared their experiences after deciding to leave for Germany, knowing they might not be able to return. Then, Marc von Boemcken (Germany) described the challenges of the field research project "Forms of local security in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—The emergence of securityscapes" where he, together with Hafiz Boboyorov, had to learn how to "work under the radar" but not compromising research.

Last but not least, the session explored ways and means of how to help researchers at risk to continue pursuing their scientific careers. Barbara Sheldon of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation underlined that the experiences of von Boemcken and Boboyorov as part of the research team on the ground were an ideal prerequisite for successfully applying for a Philip Schwartz fellowship. The role of Philip Schwartz Initiative is to enable German institutions—be it universities, universities of applied science, and independent research institutions—to support researchers under threat not only immediately after having fled from their home countries. The biggest challenge is to support these researchers so that they can take the next steps in the transition process of becoming part of the German research community.

BICC's session "Global inequalities in the academic world: Researchers under threat" on 12 June 2018 at the Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum 2018

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Hafiz Boboyorov, Merjam Wakili and Barbara Sheldon \ engaging in the discussion

Global inequalities in the academic world: Researchers under threat

While journalists under threat receive worldwide support and coverage, what is the situation like for academics who also increasingly face security threats and risks when doing their work? This was the guiding question for the discussion between Hafiz Boboyorov, Cuneyt Gurer, Monika Haas, Barbara Sheldon and Marc von Boemcken, moderated by Merjam Wakili.



Merjam Wakili \

is a freelance facilitator, consultant and coach. Previously, she was a project manager and media trainer at DW Akademie.



Monika Haas \

is a freelance journalist who works for public-service broadcasting in Germany and specializes in science and studies, regularly featuring minorities and reporting on researchers under threat.

From the very beginning, the panel promised to include highly relevant perspectives on the question “Researchers under threat”: The participants were two researchers at risk, one representative of the Philipp Schwartz Initiative¹, one researcher dealing with coping mechanisms of people living in (semi-) authoritarian states and a journalist covering the problems of researchers who were forced to flee from their home countries. First, the moderator Merjam Wakili, a freelance facilitator from Bonn, introduced the panellists, starting with a short movie directed by the journalist Monika Haas. The video “Elude prison and the regime. Fleeing to Germany”² documents the efforts of a Syrian couple to get back into academic circles with the help of the Philipp-Schwartz initiative after their escape to Germany.

1 The Philipp Schwartz Initiative was launched by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation together with the German Federal Foreign Office. It enables universities, universities of applied science and independent research institutions to grant threatened researchers fellowships for research stays in Germany. The initiative has been made possible through the generous support from the Federal Foreign Office, the Alfred Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach Foundation, the Klaus Tschira Foundation, the Robert Bosch Stiftung, the Stiftung Mercator.

2 Video (in German) available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzjFDzg13Q> and “Magazin alpha-Campus” ARD alpha; <https://www.br.de/fernsehen/ard-alpha/sendungen/campusmagazin/hilfe-fuer-verfolgte-wissenschaftler-fluechtlinge-100.html>

Researchers at risk in the media: An issue of trust and reliability

Picking up on the theme of the film, the moderator asked Ms Haas how she could convince the protagonists to participate in the film. This had, indeed, not been easy, as they both had security concerns. The main obstacles for the protagonists were their fear of being seen criticizing the Syrian regime on screen, as both still have relatives in the country. But as the researchers and journalist had already been in contact for some time, there was a sufficient level of trust among all sides to finally start the project. The issue of trust and reliability between researchers who have fled and different representatives of the welcoming community—not only in the media—turned out to be a question repeatedly being raised in the session.

“A sudden change of identity”

Reverting to the question “Researcher under threat”, Merjam Wakili asked the two scholars Hafiz Boboyorov and Cuneyt Gurer about their feelings after deciding to leave for Germany, knowing they might not be able to return. Cuneyt Gurer described it as a harrowing experience, marked by a sudden change

of identity. He had been unemployed as a researcher in Turkey for a while and worked as a consultant with Syrian refugees, but after coming to Germany, his fate was no longer in his hands, and his identity “changed within a week”. His friends, family members and people in his professional network did not have many options to offer him as the things



Dr Cuneyt Gurer \

a political scientist from Turkey, is under threat from the Turkish government and had to apply for asylum in Germany with his family. Gurer received his PhD degree from the Department of Political Science at Kent State University in 2007. He has extensive experience in international projects and participated in several internationally recognized research activities with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), UNICEF and UNODC. He worked with non-governmental aid agencies working with Syrian refugees in Turkey and provided consultancy to increase the effectiveness of aid operations. He has been working as an Adjunct Faculty Member at George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies since 2016.

progressed rapidly. Making a decision that would significantly change his life was not easy without support from academia, government institutions and professional network. While he once had been instructing refugees in Turkey, he suddenly found himself in the position of an asylum seeker, being transferred to seven different camps with his family. Asked how his self-perception has changed since arriving in Germany, he answered that the most

painful experience was the changing relationship with friends and colleagues, as his personal network did not know how to respond to the new situation. He argued that the bureaucracy (responsible for integration) needs to be more responsive to individual level needs, career paths, and capabilities. Such a process should best be managed as an individual learning process which can also be considered as a coping mechanism. The entire process and challenges should not be taken too personal, and people who endure a similar process should bear in mind that the more emotional one’s reactions to the environment are the more difficult the process gets. He advised to keep emotions in check and to use reason at all times. Nevertheless, the family had not expected to go through what they went through in the end. To not to unsettle the children, they had told them that they were travelling abroad for a holiday, but when they ended up in a refugee camp, they were all stunned.



Dr Hafiz Boboyorov \

is a scholar from Tajikistan. He is currently a Philipp-Schwartz scholarship holder at BICC after he had to leave Tajikistan in 2017. Boboyorov’s fields of expertise include inter alia existential security and practices of people, interdisciplinary conceptualization of existential security and social practices of people as well as Islamic politics in contemporary Tajikistan and other Central Asian societies. In 2014, he founded the Center for the Study of Contemporary Processes and Future Planning at the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan, Dushanbe, Tajikistan. He was Director of the Center until 2015.



International participants \ shared their views on research at risk

For Hafiz Boboyorov, who had come to Germany with the support of the Philipp Schwartz Initiative and is doing research in a BICC project, the primary challenge was to study German and to get integrated into the job market, for which he feels he still needs more capabilities. As BICC is supporting him through the transition period but is not obliged to provide further support after his scholarship runs out, he considers this to be his main concern. He has tried to apply for jobs, but in his field of research, this is very difficult as he faces a great deal of political pressure and is threatened by surveillance in all post-Soviet countries. So, is it at all possible for him to do fieldwork there? The moderator, taking up the point, inquired whether being critical means leaving the region, to which Boboyorov replied that first, he moved to Russia and then to Kyrgyzstan, but he was always under surveillance as the security services of all countries cooperate closely. Researchers with links to Western institutions are portrayed as agents, and their work is being made almost impossible in the region.

“Working under the radar” but not compromising research

Adding to this, Marc von Boemcken spoke about his experiences in research in the field in Tajikistan where he worked together with Hafiz Boboyorov in the BICC project “Forms of local security in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—The emergence of securityscapes”, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. This project examines the everyday practices of people coping with the security challenges that regularly confront them—be it ethnic minorities, people from the LGBT-(Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) community or representatives from critical NGOs. In this context, von Boemcken also witnessed researchers continuously being intimidated and afraid of saying something they might not be allowed to say. Aware of this threat, the project design contained certain specifics; for example, the researchers on the ground were trained in encrypting their emails. Collecting data and managing them was a sensitive issue.

As project leader, Marc von Boemcken had to learn that even the term “securityscapes” caused problems and contributed to the insecurity of researchers

because they feared that officials would misunderstand it to mean intelligence. So, the project team framed the wording new and used “coping mechanisms” instead. For Marc von Boemcken, “working under the radar” but not compromising research was one of the most exiting challenges of the project.

How to become part of the German research community

Barbara Sheldon of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation underlined that the experiences of von Boemcken and Boboyorovas part of the research team on the ground were an ideal prerequisite for successfully applying for a Philip Schwartz fellowship. Both for BICC and the researcher at risk it was a “win-win-situation” as it was a good match. The role of Philip Schwartz Initiative is to enable German institutions—be it universities, universities of applied science, and independent research institutions—to support researchers under threat not only immediately after having fled from their home countries. The biggest challenge is to support these researchers so that they can take the next steps in the transition process of becoming part of the German research community.

Cuneyt Gurer brought in his perspective of this process and described the difficulties he had when he tried to get in touch with different institutions by sending e-mails over e-mails, hoping to find the right “entry point” to academic circles or to get access to useful networks. He was aware of the fact that the researchers themselves are responsible for finding their place. But this also means to face that “no one is looking for you”. As bureaucracy always takes time the researcher finds himself in limbo to stay or leave. One means of support would be additional funding for travel and conference participation which would help to find the right institution and the right work.

In reply to this intervention, Barbara Sheldon expressed her deep respect for the enormous amount of resilience a researcher at risk has to find in shaping their future. At the same time, she pointed out that the Philip Schwartz Initiative can only support the first steps for finding the entry points to the competitive German research market. Her advice



Dr Barbara Sheldon \

is Head of Division for Strategic Planning at the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and as such responsible for the development and implementation of the Philipp Schwartz Initiative for supporting threatened scholars. Before, her responsibilities included the development of a programme for implementing “Welcome centres for internationally mobile researchers” at universities in Germany, creating a German network of Welcome centres and linking it to a European network of similar institutions (EURAXESS).

was to be flexible and open to a multitude of perspectives. She also had observed that some researchers found their way back to their region of origin.

What can (social) media do?

Coming back to the question of how the media could support researchers under threat, Monica Haas took quite a sobering view. There is little interest in difficult niche topics in general, and therefore in the background of displaced persons and displaced academics in particular. Viewers-share or clicks, however, are the benchmark for programme planning as the success of editorial departments and entire broadcasting slots. Increasingly, the public broadcasters (here ARD) in Germany are criticized by the public and politicians that their programmes often miss the interests of the viewers. Haas concedes that in the TV programmes that she is involved in, there is little chance to place this topic. As one of the regular authors of the 30-minute TV programme



Dr Marc von Boemcken \

is a Senior Researcher at BICC and a lecturer of security policy at the University of Bonn. His work focuses inter alia on theories of war and organized violence as well as everyday security practices in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan; countries which are characterized by post-conflict situations, authoritarian forms of government, ethnic tensions, gross social injustices and strong migration dynamics.

Alpha Campus in a special-interest channel of the ARD, she at least has got the chance to report on this topic about once a year. To attract a broad public interest for the situation of researchers at risk continues to be a tough journalistic challenge for herself and the editorial department.

In the print media, the public broadcasting radio stations or in the web, the situation is different. Here, due to the more frequent change of programmes/publications, the chance to work on niche topics is higher—an advantage of media such as the Deutschlandfunk.

Picking up this point, Merjam Wakili referred to the role of social media, especially to the information portal “Chance for science”³, organized by Professor Carmen Bachmann, University Leipzig. This Internet platform for displaced scientists and German research institutions is intended to give them a means to get in touch with other academics of the respective research field, benefit from access to

libraries, conferences and other university events or conduct joint research projects. It also helps displaced and local students to get to know other students with the same interests, of different cultures with which they can communicate and broaden their horizons.

In Barbara Sheldon’s point of view, the media could help to create positive pictures by telling success stories about researches from abroad who successfully continued their careers in Germany. The work of the Philip Schwartz Initiative could also benefit from this. Although the initiative is currently backed by all political parties, it is not a “permanent programme” and has to fight for continuity in the challenging political climate of arising right wing parties.

International cooperation: Not a question of black or white

The final round of the session also discussed the challenges of international cooperation and how the international community could help. Hafiz Boboyorov described how researchers are intimidated by state institutions and on the local level in Tajikistan. Censorship and surveillance mechanisms are implemented within the academic institutional framework. Critical topics like this are not addressed in international cooperation e. g. between UN-agencies and Tajikistan and for political reasons, there is no institutional support for researchers at risk.

Marc von Boemcken finally addressed the responsibility of Western academia. Although in some countries academic institutions participate in repression, the question “Should we blacklist them or should we cooperate?” is not easy to answer. Too many factors and interests play a role. To find a solution in favour of researchers at risk is certainly not a question of “black or white”.

³ Retrieved from <https://home.uni-leipzig.de/~chanceforscience/index.php?lang=en>

**bicc **

Internationales Konversionszentrum Bonn
Bonn International Center for Conversion GmbH

Pfarrer-Byns-Straße 1, 53121 Bonn, Germany
+49 (0)228 911 96-0, Fax -22, bicc@bicc.de

www.bicc.de
www.facebook.com/bicc.de



Director for Research
Professor Dr. Conrad Schetter

Director for Administration
Michael Dedek

EDITOR
Susanne Heinke

COPYEDITOR
Heike Webb

SUPPORT
Tim Röing

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