

On international scientific cooperation in contexts of systematic violations of international law

Resolution of the German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology (GASCA)

Preamble: Academia in times of Increasing State Violence and Repression

The global conditions of international academic cooperation have changed markedly in recent years. Increasing militarization of state policies, violations of international law, and the growing instrumentalization of research for military and geopolitical purposes have reshaped the university and research landscape. These developments are not confined to any single country or region but reflect broader structural tendencies observable across multiple contexts. In many settings, universities have been increasingly drawn into state security strategies, while academic resources and expertise can be mobilized for military, surveillance, or repressive ends. At the same time, academic freedom faces mounting pressures, including censorship and the silencing of critical voices. Against this backdrop, international academic cooperation cannot simply be regarded as politically neutral or inherently peace-promoting. In certain contexts, institutional cooperation entails the risk of legitimizing or enabling violence or violations of international law. The purpose of this document is to provide members of the GASCA with guidance on questions of institutional academic cooperation in contexts where governments systematically undermine international law, academic freedom, and human rights.

This document proceeds from the recognition that national, institutional, and even departmental positions are not monolithic, and emphasizes the value of examining and, where necessary, reconsidering institutional relationships in light of professional, ethical, and legal considerations, including applicable constitutional norms. The criteria outlined below are intended to guide structured reflection and critical assessment across different contexts.

I. Academic freedom and international cooperation as cornerstones of scientific work

The German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology (GASCA) reaffirms the fundamental importance of academic freedom in research and teaching, as well as of international scientific cooperation. These principles underpin all academic work and are expressly enshrined in the German Constitution, which guarantees “freedom of the arts and sciences, research and teaching” (Art. 5(3) GG). They are further supported and advanced by Germany’s central scientific institutions and organizations, including the Joint Science Conference (GWK), the Alliance of Science Organizations (Allianz), the German Rectors’ Conference (HRK), and the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers (DHV).

International scientific cooperation enables the generation of knowledge across national borders, expands possibilities for shared knowledge production, and contributes significantly to addressing global challenges. For social and cultural anthropology, international exchange is constitutive of the discipline, which is based on transcultural dialogue, critical engagement with different forms of knowledge and practice, and recognition of the plurality and dignity of human experience. Cross-border cooperation is therefore not optional but essential to the discipline.

At the same time, the GASCA emphasizes that academic freedom and international cooperation are not context-free ideals, but are exercised in concrete political, legal, and institutional environments that may shape, enable, or constrain scholarly work in profoundly unequal ways. A principled

commitment to academic freedom therefore requires ongoing critical reflection on the conditions under which research and cooperation take place.

II. Normative limits of academic freedom: Legal obligations and ethical responsibility

Constitutional and international legal obligations

As stated in the German Rectors' Conference's "Guidelines and Standards in International Higher Education Cooperation,"¹ the freedom of research and teaching is exercised within a clearly defined normative framework: "In their actions, German higher education institutions operate on the foundation of the German Constitution, the European Convention on Human Rights, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the United Nations human rights conventions."

The German Constitution binds public institutions of higher education not only to respect fundamental rights domestically, but Article 26 also requires such institutions to abstain from any acts that disrupt the peaceful coexistence of nations.² While primarily prohibitive in nature, Article 26 forms part of a broader constitutional framework directed toward the preservation of peace and the promotion of international understanding. These principles are relevant to decisions concerning international cooperation, including the selection, continuation, and suspension of institutional partnerships. Furthermore, as a signatory to the Genocide Convention (1948) and to international treaties on the prevention of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, Germany is bound by corresponding obligations under international law.

While these constitutional and legal obligations apply directly to all public German institutions, including universities, the underlying principles—respect for fundamental human rights and commitment to peaceful international relations—also serve as a shared ethical horizon. This horizon applies to professional associations, civil society actors, and scholarly communities beyond Germany and beyond anthropology.

The GASCA explicitly stresses that critique of institutional policies or government actions in light of international law must not be used to justify discrimination against individuals based on nationality, religion, or ethnicity. These norms are intended to protect individuals, particularly those working under conditions of repression, censorship, or violence.

Institutional guidelines and voluntary commitments

Beyond their legal obligations, scientific organizations at national and international levels have established specific guidelines that define standards for responsible research and cooperation. The German Rectors' Conference states clearly: "When German universities engage in cross-border activities, they should be aware of their anchoring in firm, well-considered value systems."³ International cooperation is therefore not value-neutral; it entails responsibility in practice for promoting human rights, international peace, and democratic values.

The German Research Foundation (DFG), in its "Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Research Practice," emphasizes that researchers should exercise their constitutionally guaranteed academic freedom responsibly: "Researchers adopt a responsible approach to the constitutionally guaranteed

¹ https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-07-Internationales/02-07-01-Internationale-Strategie/HRK_Beschluss_Leitlinien_und_Standards_in_der_internationalen_Hochschulkooperation.pdf

² Article 26(1) of the German Constitution: https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/gg/art_26.html

³ <https://www.hrk.de/themen/internationales/strategische-internationalisierung/leitlinien-und-standards/>

freedom of research. ... With regard to research projects, the potential consequences of the research should be evaluated in detail and the ethical aspects should be assessed.”⁴

From this perspective, freedom of science is inseparable from responsibility. This responsibility calls for critical awareness of the structural, institutional, and political contexts in which research takes place without implying predetermined courses of action.

In this spirit, more than 70 German universities have adopted civil clauses that commit research and teaching to civilian purposes. The GASCA is committed to this principle, not least in light of the historical entanglement of German academia with genocide and other forms of annihilatory violence. It views it as an important guideline for evaluating international collaborations.⁵

III. Changed global conditions: Militarization and challenges to the international legal order

The global conditions under which international academic cooperation takes place have changed markedly in recent years. These changes include the increasing militarization of state policies and the erosion of the rules-based international order through wars of aggression, annexations, and prolonged occupations in violation of international law. They also encompass the growing instrumentalization of science and research for military, security, and geopolitical purposes. In numerous national contexts, universities and research institutions have been increasingly drawn into state security strategies. Academic resources may be directed toward the development of weapons, surveillance, or dual-use technologies, and academic expertise may be mobilized to support military operations, domestic repression, or the legitimization of violence. Moreover, academic freedom is under attack where critical voices and positions are subjected to censorship, silencing, or disempowerment. These developments are not confined to any single country or region but can be observed across diverse national contexts. This document has been developed in light of contemporary global conflicts and is intended to be applicable across comparable contexts where similar structural conditions arise.

The German Association of University Professors and Lecturers (DHV) has drawn attention to the responsibility of scholars and academic institutions under these circumstances: “However, where authoritarian states seek to undermine or even eliminate the international order based on legal agreements through the threat or use of military force, science must also show determination. At such tipping points, it must demonstrate its stance and take a position.”⁶

Against this backdrop, the GASCA emphasizes that international scientific cooperation cannot be assumed, as a matter of course, to be peace-promoting, politically neutral, or ethically unproblematic. In certain contexts, institutional cooperation may risk stabilizing and legitimizing violence and injustice, thereby implicating German, European, and other universities worldwide in potential violations of international law.

Social and cultural anthropology bears particular responsibility in this regard. The discipline’s history includes entanglements with colonial domination, racist societal orders, and—particularly in Germany—genocide, as well as the instrumentalization of knowledge for projects of social control. At the same time, it has produced sustained analyses of power, inequality, and violence and has developed methodological approaches that engage closely with socially and politically sensitive forms of local knowledge.

⁴ <https://www.dfg.de/de/grundlagen-themen/grundlagen-und-prinzipien-der-foerderung/gwp/kodex>

⁵ <http://zivilklausel.de/bestehende-zivilklauseln>

⁶ <https://www.hochschulverband.de/fileadmin/redaktion/download/pdf/resolutionen/Resolution-ScienceDiplomacy.pdf>

In this spirit, the GASCA calls for critical examination of its own institutional practices and international collaborations, including those intersecting with militarized research agendas in both authoritarian and liberal states.

IV. Considerations for the suspension of institutional cooperation

Institutional cooperation vs. individual collaboration

The GASCA draws a clear and principled distinction between institutional cooperation and individual scholarly collaboration.

Members are encouraged to carefully assess institutional cooperation agreements and, where necessary, suspend those that risk stabilizing, legitimizing, or materially supporting injustice or violations of international law.

Institutional cooperation includes formal agreements and arrangements between universities, research institutes, professional associations, and other academic bodies concerning joint research projects, funding programs, strategic partnerships, and publication infrastructures that are institutionally funded, coordinated, or supported.

By contrast, individual scientific collaboration—including personal research exchanges, conference participation, and co-authorship—remains fundamentally unaffected by any suspension of institutional cooperation. This applies irrespective of an individual scholar's institutional affiliation. It does not imply any expectation that researchers publish or work without institutional affiliation or outside established academic evaluation frameworks.

As stated above, the GASCA explicitly rejects any form of discrimination against individual scholars based on their nationality, citizenship, religion, or ethnicity. To the contrary, maintaining and strengthening individual scholarly exchange is particularly important for supporting researchers working under conditions of repression, censorship, or conflict.

The dual function of institutional cooperation

Institutional cooperation fulfills two interrelated functions relevant for ethical assessment:

- 1. Financial and material effects**

Institutional cooperation involves the transfer of resources, including research funding, infrastructure access, staff exchanges, and administrative support. These resources may directly or indirectly strengthen institutional structures involved in, or closely linked to, violations of international law.

- 2. Symbolic recognition and legitimization**

Institutional cooperation confers recognition and prestige, thereby signalling international acceptance and partnership. In contexts where universities are structurally implicated in systematic violations of international law, such recognition may contribute to the normalization, concealment, or indirect legitimization of injustice in international contexts.

Considerations for possible suspension of cooperation

Under the Genocide Convention and other international treaties ratified by Germany, public institutions—including universities—are obliged to take appropriate measures to prevent genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. This duty includes avoiding cooperation that may

contribute, directly or indirectly, to such crimes, including through inaction when credible public information indicates a serious risk.

The GASCA considers the suspension of institutional cooperation justifiable when the following criteria are cumulatively met, based on careful, case-specific assessment:

1. Documented systematic violations of international law

There is credible and well-documented evidence of systematic violations of international law, as established by international courts, United Nations bodies, independent commissions of inquiry, or other comparably authoritative sources. Such violations may include, but are not limited to:

- War crimes
- Crimes against humanity
- Genocide, or the creation of conditions constituting genocide
- Wars of aggression, annexations, or occupations in violation of international law
- Institutionalized systems of apartheid or other forms of structural discrimination prohibited under international law

2. Structural involvement of universities or research institutions in international law violations

Universities and research institutions are demonstrably and systematically involved in, or closely linked to, such violations under one or more of the following circumstances:

- **Direct material or technical support:** Development of weapons, surveillance systems, or other technologies directly or indirectly used in the commission of violations of international law; institutionalized cooperation with military or security agencies implicated in such violations.
- **Participation in (dis)information campaigns and strategic knowledge production:** Production or dissemination of knowledge that legitimizes, normalizes, or justifies violations of international law; participation in organized disinformation, propaganda, or strategic communication efforts serving such purposes.
- **Institutional entanglement:** Personnel, financial, or organizational links with state, military, or security structures that compromise institutional autonomy; and/or systematic repression, sanctioning, or marginalization of scholars who critically examine state policies.
- **Discrimination and exclusion:** Systematic exclusion or discrimination against members of specific groups in their access to education and research; destruction, confiscation, or inaccessibility of archives, libraries, and other resources essential to scholarly work.

3. Contexts of German and European shared responsibility

In assessing the appropriateness of cooperation, broader political and institutional contexts may also be relevant. Academic institutions are embedded in national and transnational political frameworks, including security arrangements, funding infrastructures, and diplomatic relations. Awareness of these entanglements can inform a reflective and consistent approach to evaluating cooperation.

Such contexts may include:

- **Military or security cooperation:** including, but not limited to, weapons deliveries, security assistance, or joint military programs.
- **Financial, diplomatic, or political support:** arrangements that enable or shield violations of international law and fundamental human rights, including, but not limited to, aid, trade agreements, and political backing.

- **Institutional interdependencies through funding programs:** e.g., Horizon Europe, including overheads, infrastructure support, and reputational benefits that strengthen institutional structures and capacities.

These considerations do not entail predetermined conclusions or courses of action regarding specific institutional partnerships, but instead underscore that such assessments should be situated within broader constellations of shared responsibility and structural interdependence. Historical awareness about grave violations of international law and systemic injustice may further inform the development of appropriate safeguards.

Decisions concerning specific cooperation agreements ultimately remain the responsibility of individual members and their respective institutions. While the present document offers criteria, it does not aim at collective enforcement.