

German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), Scholarship programme “Hilde Domin Programme”, funded by the Federal Foreign Office (AA), for students at risk of being formally or de facto denied educational or other rights in their country of origin.

Accompanying Interdisciplinary Programme – First on-site Meeting at the University of Konstanz, 22-24 March 2023

Welcome Address

Professor Wolfgang Seibel

When I started drafting the remarks with which I wanted to address you, the recipients of a Hilde Domin fellowships, I was wondering what, according to all likelihood, your expectations or, maybe, your skepticism might be. One thing we were pretty sure about from the very outset was that, by definition, we would not have to teach you about the essence and the importance of fundamental rights, human rights in particular. Because, after all, what made you eligible for the programme was precisely that one of those fundamental rights was violated, the right to pursue one's education without ideological or political restriction, let alone repression.

Yet, we are entirely aware that our perspective on problems of freedom and repression might be one-sided. The way how we in the so-called Global North perceive the rest of the world is characterised by a kind of myopia. A recent study conducted at the University of Heidelberg revealed that more than 70% of prime time news coverage in Germany's first television channels flagship, the “Tagesschau”, is about Germany itself, other European countries, North America and, to some extent at least, the Middle East. The rest of the world, the so-called Global South, is more or less absent from both the television screen and our mental screen. That implies that some of the most pressing short-term and long-term issues of this world not part of our mindset either. We live on a continent that experiences the first war of aggression since the end of World War II, waged by a nuclear power, the Russian Federation, against a sovereign neighboring country, Ukraine. So our senses and patterns of attention are literally absorbed by the immediate threat of military aggression and huge losses of human lives. We know, however, that we don't and did not bother in previous decades and until today about violence and human suffering elsewhere in the world: Civil wars, genocidal action *and* military intervention in foreign countries we ourselves participated in, such as one in Afghanistan since since 2001. There is certainly no sense in auto-flagellation – in plain English: notorious and exaggerated self-criticism – of us in the Global North. But more humility and empathy is the least we owe to those who have been or still are much more exposed to violence and repression and military threat than we, living, so far, under stable, democratic and prosperous conditions.

Viewed through this particular angle, the Hilde Domin programme you are participating in is not an overwhelming achievement but an achievement it is. It emerged, not by coincidence, out of the cooperation of two institutions that may be denoted as guardians of multi-perspec-

tivity. The German Federal Foreign Office emphasises the role of international student exchange in general and the support of students like you, exposed to restrictions, repression or even persecution in your home countries, as an integral part of German foreign policy. This approach is not self-evident and it is being implemented chiefly by the German Academic Exchange Service, the DAAD. And again, I would like to extend both my gratitude and to express my welcome to the DAAD representatives who took the burden of the long way to Konstanz and are joining us today, Dr. Christian Hülshörster and Ms Stefanie Kottowski.

Yet, multi-perspectivity as a mere principle does not tell us very much about how to address exactly the very issues of democracy, rule of law, civil society, good governance and related personal qualification and skills. What belongs to a sober and honest approach to these crucial issues in this particular programme is above all to avoid misconceptions. I name three of them: Preaching to the converted; treating values, democratic values in particular, as a sort of culture-free patterns; using the rejection of Western value universalism as an excuse for new political and moral indifference

Like I said before, we don't need to teach you what freedom and fundamental rights are about. You know best and certainly much better than we do what the absence of freedom and fundamental rights imply. By the same token, we need to refrain from praising Western political and cultural values as a sort of portable comprehensive model regardless of what the actual circumstances might be under which you yourself might be able or unable, willing or unwilling to pay tribute to those very values. And, finally and maybe most importantly, we should not confuse awareness of cross-cultural differences with a license for denying solidarity with those suffering from repression and persecution.

Instead, this very programme, we suppose, is devoted to the notion of mutual learning, realism and a sober definition of the proverbial Red Lines that should not be trespassed when it comes to the protection of your freedom as students and of the integrity of our profession as scholars and academic teachers.

Within this programme, mutual learning takes place at various occasions and through various mechanisms. While the core of the academic teaching part is distant learning in the form of webinars, the webinars themselves are designed as an interactive forum with a relatively small size of participants. Interaction may take place over the conventional channel of written questions and responses but also in the framework of the meanwhile usual platforms such as Zoom, WebEx, Big Blue Button, Teams -- etc. The most important venue of direct interaction and mutual learning is, however, the on-site sessions held here at the University of Konstanz. It is in the various formats of workshops, so-called Open Spaces, discussion groups and panels where crucial topics of democratic governance, civil society, development of personal skills and cross-cultural exchange will be addressed. This happens primarily on the basis of our own planning and schedule. At the same time though, you as participants of the programme will be encouraged to articulate your own wishes and preferences for themes and topics to be discussed.

What is also part of this interaction is an exchange of impressions, experiences and ideas concerning this very country, Germany. After all, you are living here for several years, in many instances not knowing whether or not, let alone at what point in time, you will be able to return to your home country. And like everybody else exposed to a foreign language in a foreign country with its own differentiated culture and subcultures you need to learn the essentials and you will make encouraging and also disappointing experiences. The on-site sessions here in Konstanz will be one place where all this can be discussed. And it is quite indicative that even among ourselves as the professors running this programme the question “how the Germans tick” is subject to deliberation and dispute – no surprise in a country where approximately one quarter of the population has personal or family roots abroad.

Which brings me to the issue of realism. Realism is relevant in two dimensions. One is the level of ambition connected with this programme. We believe that treating topics of democracy, rule of law, civil society, good governance and personal adaptation to a more or less competitive professional environment on the basis of a comprehensive so-called Western model would be futile and useless. Instead, these broad issues need to be broken down to minimal standards which to achieve democratic governance, the rule of law and differentiated civil society structures are just more promising and reliable than authoritarian regimes and outright dictatorship. That applies to the protection of physical integrity, the right of free speech and the freedom of movement and, as far as our profession and your education is concerned, the freedom of research and teaching.

Which leads us to the second dimension to which realism applies or needs to be applied. It concerns the nature of authoritarianism – the world you escaped from. And it is here where sobriety and learning is certainly not confined to you as recipients of a Hilde Domin fellowship. My own generation, those who are now in their 60s and 70s, were born and raised under the condition of the Cold War that divided Europe into two parts separated by what Winston Churchill in 1946 had termed the Iron Curtain. That order we took for granted, including the endurance and stability of communist dictatorship in Central and Eastern Europe. Many if not most of us thought that a repressive state is more stable and enduring than a pluralist state exposed to the influence of countervailing societal forces. The very existence of civil society even under dictatorship was something most of us didn't take seriously. And, as a consequence of our ignorance, we were totally taken by surprise when, in the Fall of 1989, all the dictatorships in Central and Eastern Europe collapsed like a house of cards, literally in a matter of weeks. The lesson to be learned was that authoritarianism is not only based on the non-acknowledgement of civil society but also, and inevitably so, on a system of outright lies, an inability to learn and historical denialism. Especially, when it comes to a history of violence and mass-crime. So authoritarianism is not stable, but inherently fragile, vulnerable and exposed to latent instability.

And it is here with the two types of realism I refer to may at some point reinforce each other. Since insisting on just a small set of fundamental rights is already incompatible with the basic

logic of authoritarianism and dictatorship whose system of lies and denialism also, if not primarily, pertain to the denial of basic individual rights regardless of a broader set of democratic institutions. So that, accordingly, the fight for freedom, let alone its success, always and inevitably contributes to the latent destabilisation of dictatorship and authoritarianism.

Which brings me, finally, to the aforementioned Red Lines that must not be trespassed when the protection of fundamental rights and the strive for overcoming authoritarianism and dictatorship is at stake. There is one general aspect to it and an aspect that concerns our profession as scholars and your situation as students in this country.

The general Red Line not to be trespassed concerns the resistance to any temptation of whitewashing. Whitewashing means to trivialise and to downplay the nature of repression under authoritarian rule and dictatorship. The challenge is naming and shaming or, according to a British idiom, to call a spade a spade. To call state-sponsored violence and state-sponsored crime, mass crime in particular, by their name and to support any initiatives, especially the ones of non-governmental organisations, in the effort of discovery, investigation and documentation. Which includes the fight against impunity to which, by the way, German courts in recent years made considerable contributions especially in the prosecution of crimes against humanity committed by the Assad regime in Syria.

The second aspect of Red Line awareness immediately concerns our business as university scholars and you as students. You came to a country where, for the time being, you found the proverbial safe haven that protects you, as far as possible, against repression and persecution. The scientific part of your own studies will remain unrestrained with all the open-mindedness and access to all kinds of data and sources and literature, all the conferences and academic exchange you like to participate in or to make use of. Any restriction, however implicit or indirect, in this particular domain that forms the essence of scholarly teaching and research needs to be neutralised without the slightest compromise or concession. Which, however, is not the only threat to be addressed. We do know that a number of countries use their embassies and consulates in Germany for surveillance and intimidation. Surveillance and intimidation of their nationals living abroad. China goes as far as entertaining particular offices whose specific task it is not only to put Chinese students abroad under surveillance but also to intimidate them with the threat of repressive consequences for their families at home in case the students deviate from the narrow path of political conformity imposed by the Communist Party and the government in Beijing. Needless to say, this practice, akin to dictatorship itself, needs to be named and shamed as well and, above all, needs to be neutralised and suspended from the very outset.

To sum this up: Please feel encouraged. Feel encouraged to knit your personal networks across the board, entailing your fellow student, us as lecturers and professors and also representatives of German governmental agencies, federal and state parliaments or other key persons of public life in this country. We will support those efforts at the best of our ability. At the same time, feel encouraged to give us any sort of feedback you think could be helpful for improving this very programme, no matter what the feedback is about, whether it concerns

people or content. Finally, feel encouraged to approach us with any other question that, in your own definition, is directly or just remotely connected to the programme we are running in cooperation with the DAAD. This might concern the programme itself or how the programme is linked to your own studies.

For the remaining two and a half days of your stay here at the University of Konstanz I wish you enriching personal encounters, vivacious and stimulating discussions in tomorrow's working groups and, in more general terms, all the best for the remainder of your studies and your stay here in Germany.