

Science-at-Risk Lecture Series – Event Reports

21.11.2022: How do we critically re-think research productivity during mass repressions: case of Belarusian researchers

22.11.2022 Quantitative data in public discourse during the Russian invasion of Ukraine

In the framework of the Science-at-Risk Lecture Series, the Round Table Discussions 'How can we critically rethink research productivity during mass repression: The case of Belarusian researchers?' and 'Quantitative data in public discourse during the Russian invasion of Ukraine', both moderated by Andrei Vazyana, took place online in November 2022 in cooperation with the Science at Risk Emergency Office, funded by the Evaluating Office (Auswertiges Amt), and EEGA.

In the first round table discussion 'How can we critically rethink research productivity during mass repression: the case of Belarusian researchers?' this question was discussed by six invited Belarusian researchers from the fields of history, sociology, anthropology, law, literature and gender studies. What unites them is that they have all been affected by the repressions of the 2020s: Some were taken into administrative detention, some lost their jobs at state universities in Belarus, four had to leave Belarus and cannot return, two did not leave Belarus and therefore have to hide their names, one of them lives in Ukraine and is exposed to the hardships of the Russian invasion.

In Belarus, there is a strong tradition of mutual engagement and cooperation between civil society and the academic community (although conditions have become very difficult since 2020). During the anti-Lukashenka protests in 2020, intellectuals and thinkers both inside and outside academia joined voluntary initiatives, activism, and partisan resistance. They wrote journalistic reports and participated in public roundtables instead of academic conferences. After the mass repression began, some were imprisoned, and others had to leave Belarus. This is one of the reasons why continuing an academic career by publishing scientific articles in high-ranking journals and participating in international conferences has been very challenging for Belarusian scientists since 2020.

The aim of the discussion was to share experiences of dealing with "academic exigencies" during war, mass repression and forced migration with scholars affected by wide-ranging social adversities in their countries. Discussions were held on how researchers and public intellectuals from and in Belarus navigate between different paradigms of knowledge production and representation of science in society, how institutions respond to exceptional circumstances affecting some of their staff or applicants, and what are possible changes that should be made. In addition, the academics shared their reflections on what it is like to become and remain a member of a university faculty and the importance of continuing to do and regularly report on academic work during mass repression. They mentioned specific vulnerabilities such as visa restrictions for Belarusian citizens that make it difficult to participate in communities and events other than Russian. Security concerns were increasingly expressed. Participants also noted the lack of consideration by Western institutions of the risks to the relatives and families of political refugees.

Finally, Belarusian society's current expectations of social scientists are likely to differ significantly from the theoretical contributions that form the basis of Western Europe's academic competitiveness. Striking a balance between two paradigms of knowledge production and dissemination requires not only compromise and creative solutions from scholars, but also the solidarity of international institutions to make the scientific field more inclusive - a need shared by researchers from many other countries, including outside Belarus.

The second event of the Science-at-Risk Lecture featured four experts representing state universities and a non-state think tank: Andrii Gorbachyk (National Taras Shevchenko University of Kyiv), Ivan Verbytskyi and Natalia Lomonosova (both Cedos Think Tank) and Natalia Glebova (Melitopol State Pedagogical University). They discussed current research and data collection that has been severely affected by the all-out war but persists. Quantitative sociology is in high demand in the media today, as it allows to highlight consensus points within Ukrainian society and to track changes in public opinion in a highly dynamic context.

Against the backdrop of the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, quantitative sociological data gained particular weight in the public debate in 2022. Unlike many other post-Soviet countries, especially authoritarian ones, sociological data in Ukraine is collected systematically and decentrally, without control or explicit censorship by state institutions - hence such data enjoys a high level of trust, interest and practical use. Figures on political attitudes, ethnic identity, mother tongue, electoral votes, criminal offences, visas and residence permits issued, etc. are at the centre of discussions on collective responsibility, cultural differences and sanctions policies. Surveys are used in the mass media, but also by politicians. Moreover, they find their way into the realm of decision-making and policy-making. In other cases, however, credible qualitative sociological findings are ignored by those in power - but remain important for the (re)production of media discourse (e.g. on support for war in a particular society).

Andrei Vazyana, as moderator, asked about the changes in societal impact and influence of Ukrainian sociology in 2022, what should be given special methodological attention in the current situation and how the right to interpret sociological data and translate it into policy should be distributed. He then put up for discussion what responsibility the new sociologist had in this context. One of the challenges facing quantitative research today, he said, is to take into account possible biases due to the enormous number of shifts. Since the attention of Ukrainian sociologists is primarily focused on the population remaining in the country, knowledge about those temporarily living abroad needs to be improved. Beyond quantitative figures, different attitudes emerge - and to uncover them, cooperation with qualitative researchers is needed. As the census data in Ukraine is outdated (2001), the stereotypical image of Ukraine's cultural, linguistic and political West (Centre) East divide needs to be critically examined. Ukraine is a country with intensive digitalisation, which opens up many new opportunities for survey. However, this also means that users of new digital tools can become more visible than non-users.

Furthermore, the additional obstacles to data collection in the regions most affected by the war - and even more so in Russian-occupied territories - were highlighted. In the context of a humanitarian crisis, needs assessment could be as important as (or even more important than) attitudinal research. Thanks to the rich tradition of quantitative sociological research in Ukraine and the current consolidation of professional circles, many of the emerging issues can be successfully addressed by experts.