

New Year's Address

by the President of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

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- Check against delivery! -

[Address]

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the DFG's New Year's reception. I wish you good health, happiness and success, and of course the necessary serenity to meet the challenges which may lie ahead this year.

I'm delighted that you are able to join us at this marvellous venue located at the BBAW at the Gendarmenmarkt. I hope that you enjoyed the festive season, that you were able to relax and unwind in the run-up to the new year and take a break from everyday responsibilities – and perhaps also contemplate the things we so easily forget amid the hectic pace of modern life.

The beginning of this new year, an anniversary year for the DFG, also marks a new beginning in the role of president, and I'm thrilled that you have come to celebrate with me today the start of my term in office.

Being given the opportunity to take on the role of DFG President is an indescribable pleasure. It's an even greater honour to preside over such a wonderful organisation. To all of you who were involved in last year's election, whether directly or indirectly, thank you for your trust.

As you know, I am joining the DFG directly from the research community. Until two weeks ago, I served as coordinator of a DFG Priority Programme and a LOEWE research centre. Many of you will also know me from my six-year period as Vice President of the DFG, and I had the

privilege of meeting some of you when I served as Vice President for Research at the University of Giessen. So over the past ten years, I have had the opportunity to develop my own perspectives on research funding and research administration. The essential things to me were always the dynamics of research itself and the question of which basic conditions are needed to allow for the best possible research.

And when you look at the world from a researcher's perspective, the DFG is in fact among the greatest things you can see. I've always felt that way as a scientist myself. The sheer number of grants – over 30,000 per year – is no less remarkable than the diverse range of research topics that these grants support and the variety of formats that often makes this research possible in the first place. Individual research grants form the core of DFG funding, but there are also independent junior research groups and high-risk research, not to mention major research infrastructures, Collaborative Research Centres and Clusters of Excellence. Then, of course, there is a whole range of scientific awards, above all the prestigious Leibniz Prize.

And although these are but a few examples of how the DFG advances German research, they clearly illustrate why the DFG's activities are of such vital importance to the sciences and humanities. As you can imagine, for someone who has been committed to academic research for decades, the role of DFG president is indeed a high honour.

Especially this year, as the organisation celebrates a very special anniversary: The DFG's predecessor organisation, the Notgemeinschaft der Deutschen Wissenschaft, was founded 100 years ago. Its re-establishment in 1949 marked the beginning of the DFG as it is today. What we are celebrating this year is not the hundred-year history of an institution; what we are celebrating is a principle: the principle of science-driven research funding.

But what this principle means today, what it can mean for the future, and what it must never mean again – these are questions we should always be able to answer. Ultimately, the purpose and significance of this principle can no more be taken for granted today than in the last century.

We must never forget how, in the 1930s and 1940s, so-called science-driven research funding included nationalistic thinking, outright racism and a pathos of radicalism. The result was a cold, inhuman science that performed “criminal human experiments” according to fascist policies, but also of its own accord.¹

¹ Rüdiger vom Bruch, „Von der ‚Not‘ zur ‚Allianz‘. Die DFG als Forschungsgegenstand und Institution“, in: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft. Volume 4. Karin Orth, Willi Oberkrome (eds.), Die Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. 1920–1970. Stuttgart 2010. P. 41–52, 49.

And we must not forget: The savage barbarism of the Nazis was in some ways driven by science. That is why the term “science-driven” must never be reduced to an empty phrase: the extent to which science-driven research funding can be considered good is only the same as the extent to which the sciences and humanities, and we ourselves as scientists and scholars, work on our integrity. Continuously ensuring that integrity and credibly communicating it to the world is our ongoing task today and in the future.

So as we celebrate our anniversary this year, we do it with joy and enthusiasm, but also with self-criticism and humility.

If we go a little further back in time the conditions that led to the founding of the Notgemeinschaft in the still-young Weimar Republic are quite remarkable.

The postwar era and inflation brought privations in many areas of life, and scientific productivity in Germany was hit especially hard. German science quickly lost its previous world-class status and soon there wasn't enough money to even print manuscripts. Ultimately, the country's scientific activity ground to a halt: laboratories were closed and renowned journals ceased publication.²

To remedy this obvious emergency, industrialists, bank directors and businessmen established the Stifterverband der Notgemeinschaft der deutschen Wissenschaft. In a dramatic appeal, they called on Germany's business community to make generous donations to enable free research to continue. Support also came from abroad. In addition, the establishment of the Notgemeinschaft was aided by close, very constructive coordination between the research organisations – a proven trait of our current research system whose roots can be traced back to that time.

Today, the Stifterverband and the DFG are jointly celebrating the anniversary of their origins. And we have good reason to celebrate, because together they have rendered a significant and lasting service to research, and I very much look forward to the various events taking place throughout this anniversary year. Over the course of 2020, the DFG will be running a nationwide campaign to raise awareness of the principles of free, independent research and its value to an open, informed society. With the motto “DFG2020 – Because Research Matters”, we will show how important knowledge and the sciences and humanities are and which basic princi-

² See appeal for donations by Stifterverband in 1920.

ples are associated with it, from gender equality to early career support and internationalisation. We'll be using some unusual formats to promote the message. For example, an online campaign inviting people to create their own text, image and video statements, a poster competition, a special event at the Tempodrom in Berlin and a touring bus with performance artists, designed to appeal to a range of target audiences, which will visit about a dozen locations throughout Germany. We've already had a taste of this tonight. With this campaign, we aim to share our enthusiasm for the potential of research as well as show the workings and limitations of the scientific enterprise. In this way we want to show the general public our commitment to independent academic research and inspire them to advocate for it too.

Because unfortunately, academic freedom can no longer be taken for granted everywhere, despite the fact that it is becoming increasingly important in the face of challenges such as climate change, species loss, resource scarcity and population growth. What we need is academic research that is independent and that generates knowledge and value as a result of scientific curiosity, rather than this knowledge and value being predefined. In my opinion, this is the single most important thing the DFG has to offer. And that's what I intend to continue standing up for. Of course, many research priorities need to be aligned with certain key topics in order to address current global challenges. But only the freedom to think, the freedom to develop new questions and concepts out of genuine interest, and diversity at all levels – in terms of researchers, funding formats, methods, topics and national and international cooperation – only these things enable truly new combinations, ideas and real innovation. The usefulness of these research processes often only emerges years later, sometimes decades later, and sometimes in areas far removed from the original question that researchers set out to answer. Yet its scientific impact, and indeed its economic, social, political and/or cultural impact, may be significant.

So funding merit must not be reduced to a narrow concept of usefulness. And it certainly must not be subordinate to political aims or power ambitions. Such as when universities are purged of political dissidents, or even closed. Or when historical research is reduced to consensus on a single nationalistic perspective. Or when effective research on urgent issues such as climate change is prevented.

Of course, research still takes place even under such conditions. But its opportunities to make new discoveries are constrained from the beginning, its options predefined.

When the ability of modern science to add to our knowledge is limited in this way, it cannot make the wide-ranging contributions that it alone is capable of making, and which it must make

in an era when governments and societies are facing ever-growing challenges. In my opinion, politicians and the public have a right to receive sound advice from the academic research community. Herein lies our responsibility. So I'm delighted that in this anniversary year we have the opportunity to remember what makes our research system so special: outstanding researchers, impressive infrastructures, effective national and international networks, efficient division of labour between research organisations, and their outstanding cooperation in the Alliance and with Germany's federal and state governments. Thanks to the pacts negotiated last year, we not only have the urgently needed planning security but also, through new projects such as the National High-Performance Computing Programme and the National Research Data Infrastructure Programme, more opportunities for synergistic networking and cooperation than ever before.

These must be used effectively to address current global challenges, to prevent irreversible damage to our living environment and thus the foundations of our way of life, and to tackle social inequalities and violent conflict around the world.

You might say, "The DFG can't solve the world's problems."

And of course I agree. But it's also clear that a large part of the world's problems can only be solved with a research-driven approach. This calls for research organisations, which not only have scope for action, but actively and decisively use it, and which practise effective communication and cooperation.

Today more than ever, the sciences and humanities have a responsibility encompassing the whole of society. And the right decisions can only be made with their help. But to enable these decisions to be made jointly by government, society and science, we must convincingly demonstrate to the general public just how important the sciences and humanities are and reach out to those who feel left behind.

This brings to mind a play by Bertolt Brecht, in which his character Galileo says:

"I believe that the only goal of science consists in easing the hardships of human existence."

Today, these words have almost staggering relevance. We have come to realise that this human existence depends on water, air and soil, animals and plants, and social community, and that in all probability we can only sustain our existence through true community and cooperation at all levels. In the years ahead we will learn what it really means to share.

I invite you all to join me in standing up for academic research that is characterised by integrity and service to humanity and that participates in defining its own tasks, thereby contributing to a prosperous future for all of us. We can only do this together, and together we must agree what options we have, which steps must be taken and how we should best proceed.

Only with this approach can the DFG be to its member organisations and the research community that which we aim to celebrate this year: science-driven research funding. And this can only mean research funding led by the research community for the benefit of society.

So my invitation to you is this: Let's begin the new year together, with confidence and commitment, but also with positivity and openness to mutual inspiration.

Thank you.