

Freedom and Security of Research in Europe

Speech by the President of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
(DFG, German Research Foundation)

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at the DFG's New Year's Reception
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Check against delivery!



Ladies and Gentlemen, Excellencies, Distinguished Guests,

If I am to be perfectly honest, I would like to begin this year's New Year address with a sense of speechlessness. I struggle to find words when I think of what happened to those young people who wanted to celebrate New Year's Eve together in Crans-Montana. Yet time and again, the rapid transformation of the world likewise leaves us at a loss for words – whether in view of neo-imperialist activities, the dismantling of value systems, or the catastrophic humanitarian situation in many parts of the world.

All these developments affect us here in Germany and in Europe. Yet for all our sense of shock and concern, we must find ways to overcome this speechlessness. And we are well placed to do so, for in our society we continue to enjoy the freedom to address challenges openly, listen to one another, work together to find the best solutions – and act collectively on this basis.

Research, too, has long been caught up in the crosscurrents of geopolitical strategy – far beyond sensitive areas such as energy, biotechnology, artificial intelligence or quantum research. As a result, research security, shared values and resilience have become the new coordinates of responsible international research cooperation, at the same time emerging as key guiding principles of modern research policy.

In Germany's research system, we have recently engaged in intensive debate on unresolved questions surrounding research security and security research: the close interlinking between dependencies and security concerns, and the potential contributions of civilian research to

Europe's – and NATO's – defence capability. This debate has reached a point of complexity and consolidation that makes one thing clear: we need to broaden our frame of reference.

Yes, we need more security in academia and research, just as we do in society as a whole. And the research community is actively helping to shape this change. This is why the DFG not only supports the research community here in Germany but is also actively engaged worldwide, as you well know.

Our joint achievements in Europe in the almost 70 years since the signing of the Treaties of Rome in politics, in business and in academia reinforce our firm belief that there can only be one answer:

a joint European approach.

The research community knows why. For centuries, scholars in Europe and around the world have built networks across borders – in the face of wars, crises and political imponderables – in order to share knowledge and advance discovery. Science and the humanities thrive on precisely this exchange – on cooperation, on overcoming old boundaries together and on discovering the new.

This is how genuine innovation and sustainable change come about. Perhaps the best examples of the strength – and the resilience – of outstanding European research are the widely interconnected, renowned universities, academies and research institutions of our continent.

This excellence is also sustained by the ideals of European integration: the vision of a united Europe in which former rivals cooperate peacefully and permanently across national borders through joint institutions, mutual decision-making and economic interdependence. It is a Europe of shared values – values that shape how we live together as societies and the joint action we take.

The pursuit of new knowledge likewise lives and breathes precisely this European spirit in the diversity of Europe's intellectual and research culture, too: this is what gives momentum to scholarly dialogue, making research cooperation in Europe a longstanding success story. European integration has played a key role in this – here, we only need to remind ourselves of the free movement of labour, the Schengen Agreement, the EU Framework Programmes for research and innovation, and the Erasmus+ Programme.

In this way, research and research policy in Europe have long been working together to develop and implement strategies to address current challenges.

This is reflected in the Council recommendations on research security, for example: they envisage a supportive role for the EU in dealing with unwanted knowledge transfer, foreign interference and breaches of research ethics or integrity. Plans are also under way to establish a European competence centre for research security, as well as a platform to support researchers in assessing the risks involved in their international collaborations. Uniform and binding minimum standards for research security are also envisaged under the forthcoming legislative act for the European Research Area.

Milestones are likewise being set in the field of security research: for example, the tenth EU Framework Programme will set a course that will shape the European research landscape from the year after next well into the period beyond 2035. This includes harnessing civil-military synergies along the entire value chain – including basic research. Still bearing the title Horizon Europe, the next framework programme will thus be able to support research with dual-use potential across the board. The reinterpretation of the term ‘dual use’ is remarkable in itself.

This fundamental restructuring of Horizon Europe marks a paradigm shift: the end of more than 30 years of purely civilian research framework programmes.

But important as the increased focus on security issues undoubtedly is, the key question cannot simply be how we can make this shift towards greater security and defence capabilities as effective as possible. We must also pause and weigh the consequences.

First, there is a potential immediate or collateral impact on our societies, our economies and our research systems across Europe – including here in Germany. From the perspective of science and the humanities, one particular concern is that higher security-related barriers could hinder innovation driven by research.

But the implications of this realignment go far deeper – into the very core of how we understand research itself. What impact will this have on the research community as such: on its culture and practice, on how research is conducted and on the conditions under which it takes place? How might it change the sense of purpose with which we have pursued research in Europe up until now?

In the long term, this also concerns the next generation of researchers. Will they still be able to go about their work with enthusiasm in a united Europe, pursuing academic inquiry, collaborating with colleagues around the world, and building bridges?

Behind all of this lie fundamental questions: what does the primacy of security mean in terms of the great research questions of our time and when it comes to addressing global challenges? What consequences might a reassessment of existing priorities have for our societies? And how confident can we be that these changes will not at some point impair the freedom and

independence of research – and thus also the international standing of Germany as a centre of research?

For this reason, I believe that we are well advised to foster a broad awareness of the likely impact on our research system and the possible consequences for society at large – and that we should be actively involved in shaping this transformation.

We do so for good reason, after all: “Freedom of research and an effective research system are indispensable prerequisites of an open society” – this deliberately worded statement encapsulates a principle so central that it stands at the very start of the DFG’s statutes.¹

In Germany, we have known academic freedom since the Frankfurt Constitution of 1848–49, and I am not aware of any earlier constitution that guaranteed freedom of research as a fundamental right. Today, this freedom protects not only the individual liberty to conduct research and teach: its protection also extends to the institutions required for this purpose and to the self-governance of research. What is more, it safeguards the special role that research plays both within society and for society.

We are deeply grateful for this lifeblood of innovative research – free from notions of societal utility or political expediency – as we are for the reliable support we receive through the close cooperation with our partners at federal and state level. Incidentally, this is also something that is recognised internationally.

Yet even a brief glance at the most recent history shows how quickly rights once thought secure can be lost. Academia, politics and society must therefore stand up for one another – and for the freedom of research. This also means further strengthening the resilience of science and the humanities and enhancing their security.

At the DFG, we take responsibility for maintaining a balanced relationship between security and freedom – in the interests of science and the humanities, and to protect what our research system as a whole in Germany has achieved to date. This is currently reflected in the commitment of our Senate to strengthening the resilience of science and the humanities, yet it was as long ago as 2014 that we established the Joint Committee on the Handling of Security-Relevant Research, together with the Leopoldina. This has since led to the creation of some 120 ethics committees at research institutions, providing valuable support in security-relevant matters.

In recent years we have also published recommendations, guidelines and checklists to make international cooperation more secure – in keeping with the principle: as open as possible, as

¹ Preamble, paragraph 1, sentence 1 of the DFG Statutes, as amended by the resolution of the General Assembly of 2 July 2025, entered in the register of associations under no. VR 2030 at Bonn Local Court on 17 October 2025.

protected as necessary. After all, cross-border research collaboration is vital not only to Europe's innovative capacity and competitiveness, but also to the resilience and preparedness of our democratic societies.

For this reason, we very much welcome the fact that, shortly before Christmas, agreement was reached on key points to strengthen research security in Germany. The close cooperation between academia, politics and the security authorities is crucial to ensuring that our research system retains its flexibility and remains competitive even under challenging conditions.

At the same time, the establishment of a national platform for research security – which the DFG has long advocated – makes a substantial contribution to safeguarding the freedom of research. This platform will support the research community's capacity for self-governance, for example in the assessment of risks, and will provide guidance on dealing with critical partners in international collaborations.

In drawing up this agreement, the federal government, the states and the Alliance of Science Organisations in Germany have laid an excellent foundation for upholding the balance between security and freedom also at a European level and with our international partners.

Our shared goal must be to integrate the necessary measures for research security so closely with the fifth fundamental freedom that freedom of research, free mobility and open access to knowledge are preserved. If we succeed in doing so, we will achieve something that is unprecedented for top-level research within a Europe of research.

Ladies and gentlemen,

there is one particular lesson the European peace project has drawn from its ancient roots: we cannot respond to global, geopolitical challenges with national solutions alone. Instead, we must bring together national, European and multilateral approaches. When it comes to research security in particular, European integration and global solidarity among value-based partners provide a powerful framework.

For this reason, continuing to strengthen the freedom, capacity for discovery and innovative power of science and the humanities in Europe is one of the most effective forms of prevention and protection – for our democracy, for our society and for the values we defend around the world on a day-to-day basis. And that is precisely why we are so proud to be Europeans.

Under no circumstances, however, must we sacrifice our fundamental freedom for a measure of temporary security. Rather, as Karl Popper wrote in 1945, we must “plan for freedom, and not for security – if for no other reason than that only freedom can make security secure”.²

Thank you very much.

² Karl Popper, *Die offene Gesellschaft und ihre Feinde*, volume 2: *Falsche Propheten: Hegel, Marx und die Folgen*, Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen 2003, p. 224.