

For the Freedom and Independence of Research

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

Professor Dr. Katja Becker

at the festive event held as part of the 2026 annual meeting

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Check against delivery!

Ladies and gentlemen,

In my inaugural address as President of the DFG, marking our centenary, I spoke about a principle that is deeply rooted in both the history and the identity of our organisation: the principle of science-driven research funding.

At the time, I said: “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.”¹

That question has lost none of its relevance. On the contrary: today, it has taken on a renewed urgency. After all, science-driven research funding is much more than an organisational principle. It rests on a fundamental achievement of civilisation: the conviction that knowledge is not established by authority, but by the force of the better argument; not by political direction, but by the freedom to pursue worthwhile questions.

Indeed, “the pursuit of knowledge should be regarded as something that can never be completed and never finally exhausted, and should therefore continue unceasingly.”² That thought continues to embody its true claim to freedom. Yet the pursuit of knowledge can flourish only where the outcome is not predetermined: where accepted knowledge can be questioned, hypotheses subjected to critical scrutiny and unanswered questions point the way to progress.

¹ Speech by the President of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) Professor Dr. Katja Becker at the DFG’s New Year’s Reception in Berlin, 13 January 2020, p. 2f. <https://www.dfg.de/resource/blob/174072/200113-rede-becker-neujahrsempfang-en.pdf>

²Wilhelm von Humboldt, “Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin (On the Internal and External Organization of the Higher Academic Institutions in Berlin)”, in: Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften (ed.), *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften. Band X. Zweite Abteilung: Politische Denkschriften I.* Berlin 1903 [ND 1968], pp. 250-260, quotation p. 253 (own translation).

Democracy and the pursuit of knowledge are therefore rooted in the same intellectual outlook. Both are founded on the belief that arguments should carry greater weight than authority, that criticism is more productive than certainty, and that learning matters more than being right. Both are sustained by the recognition that knowledge is never complete and that freedom is made possible not despite openness and dialogue, but precisely because of them.

For this very reason, freedom of research does not rest solely on constitutional guarantees and institutions. It also depends on a political culture that tolerates dissent, withstands criticism and does not judge knowledge by whether it confirms existing convictions.

In many countries around the world – not least in the United States, but also here in Europe – that culture has come under increasing pressure. And as democracy comes under pressure, so too does the freedom of research. And once the free pursuit of knowledge is constrained, human reason itself can no longer develop without restraint. It is not least for this reason that the DFG routinely analyses the election manifestos of political parties and their positions on research policy.

Freedom of research deserves protection not simply because researchers claim it for themselves. It deserves protection above all because a society without the free pursuit of knowledge loses its ability to distinguish between knowledge and assertion, between evidence and ideology. Those who curtail freedom of research do not weaken scholarly and scientific inquiry alone. They also undermine the very foundations of an open society.

Those who seek to control knowledge

There are political actors in this country, too, who openly call into question freedom as the foundation of the pursuit of knowledge.

The AfD's so-called government programme for Saxony-Anhalt, for example, claims that research in Germany has lost its "authenticity", alleging that it is no longer capable of producing "ideology-free knowledge". It speaks of a "decline" in the pursuit of knowledge in Germany that can be reversed only through fundamental reforms. Its stated objective is to "restore science and the humanities to their former greatness".³

Such statements demand a clear response. Not because they represent political positions, but because they reveal an understanding of research that is fundamentally incompatible with the principles enshrined in our constitution.

³ Government programme, AfD Saxony-Anhalt, section V, *Wissenschaft*. <https://afd-regierungsprogramm.de> (last accessed on 25 June 2026, own translation).

The pursuit of knowledge is free. It does not have to certify in advance that its findings are free of ideology. It thrives on transparent methods, verifiable arguments and findings that remain open to critical scrutiny. That is precisely where its strength resides.

But anyone who accuses research of being ideological without taking account of its established methods of critical inquiry replaces knowledge with suspicion. Those who seek to delegitimise entire fields of research simply because the findings conflict with their own ideological convictions place themselves outside the bounds of reasoned scholarly debate.

This becomes particularly clear when researchers themselves become the targets of political campaigns. When there are calls to abolish entire academic disciplines and to remove professors from universities because of the subjects they research, the attack is no longer directed solely at individuals.⁴ It is directed against the freedom of research as a whole. It is directed against all of us.

This is not about party politics. It concerns a fundamental question facing every free society. Who decides what research is to be pursued? And who determines which knowledge is legitimate?

For decades, democratic states governed by the rule of law have given the same answer: not those who hold political power, but the research community itself decides these questions – within the framework of its often constitutionally guaranteed freedom, its institutional autonomy and its academic expertise.

Where the pursuit of knowledge is no longer understood as an open process of inquiry, but instead is expected to serve as an instrument for confirming preconceived certainties – or even for legitimising political ideology – its very essence is placed at risk. Here, there is no longer any genuine engagement with the substance of the debate. Instead, the very conditions that make research possible become the subject of dispute.

This is why the issue extends far beyond individual disciplines, universities or funding decisions. It concerns freedom as one of the foundations of our democracy – and, with it, the defence of that very freedom without which research ceases to be true inquiry.

Looking closely and remaining vigilant

Yet the challenge does not end with overt attacks on the research enterprise. We must also remain alert whenever the concepts, methods and authority of research – sometimes boldly,

⁴ See the speech by Alice Weidel at the AfD party conference in Risa on 11 January 2025. Accessible at: www.phoenix.de/afd-parteitag-a-4737357.html (last accessed on 25 June 2026).

sometimes more subtly – are invoked to legitimise positions that would not withstand critical scrutiny.

All of us here know that knowledge gained through scientific and scholarly inquiry depends on context, nuance and methodological rigour. But when something appears to be grounded in research, and may even be couched in scholarly language, yet in reality uses research findings selectively, presents them in a distorted way or takes them out of context, then far more is at stake than merely objective argumentation. This is no longer the genuine pursuit of knowledge but simply the instrumentalisation of scholarly authority for political purposes.

The consequences are far-reaching: after all, freedom of research does not merely protect the conduct of research. It also safeguards the conditions necessary for a public debate that is guided not simply by assertion, but by rational argument and grounded in established facts.

Nor does the threat begin only when facts are openly denied. Hannah Arendt pointed out that “the resulting confusion can be considerable” [...] “when the liar, lacking the power to make his falsehood stick, does not insist on the gospel truth of his statement but pretends that this is his ‘opinion,’ to which he claims his constitutional right.”⁵ This line of thought points to an important conclusion: The danger begins as soon as the boundary between facts, opinions and political interests becomes blurred.

We should therefore remain alert whenever freedom of research is politically reinterpreted. When it is no longer understood as the freedom to conduct research, but as a claim that research findings should be confirmed, corrected or even replaced by political authority.

Research institutions occupy a complex position: although the freedom they require to carry out their work is made possible largely through public funding, they are not subject to political direction. On the contrary: their task is not to confirm prevailing social convictions, but to generate new knowledge – even, and especially, when that knowledge is uncomfortable.

This is precisely why we must remain vigilant. Freedom of research is rarely curtailed in a single step. Its erosion is already well under way when distrust of research institutions is systematically fostered, individual fields of research are singled out for political attack, and scholarly independence is portrayed as an obstacle to political action.

For this reason, safeguarding freedom of research requires more than expressions of solidarity and the protection of individual researchers, disciplines and institutions. We must defend all

⁵ Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics”, in: Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin, 1968, pp. 227-264, quotations pp. 249-250.

those institutional, cultural and constitutional conditions that make independent inquiry possible in the first place.

A guarantor of free, knowledge-driven research

The DFG stands precisely for this independence. Through its commitment to the free choice of research topics and open funding programmes, it is dedicated solely to the unfettered pursuit of knowledge. It promotes research of the highest quality and places the dynamic nature of the research process at the heart of its work – independent of political objectives and ideological expectations.

Clearly, those of us within the research community continually debate the most appropriate criteria for assessing research, and both the research system itself and the wider societal context within which research takes place are constantly evolving. Nor is there any doubt that limited resources often make difficult funding decisions unavoidable and that unsuccessful applicants may therefore experience considerable disappointment. This, too, is an inherent feature of quality-based selection processes. Under no circumstances, however, must these important debates within the research community become an opening through which the opponents of free research can advance their agenda.

As the central self-governing organisation for science and the humanities in Germany, the DFG enjoys a special kind of trust – trust in the ability of the research community to develop its own standards of quality and to recognise its own best ideas for itself. Thousands of researchers in Germany and abroad give practical expression to this principle through their voluntary service in peer review, evaluation and committee work. Their decisions are made not in the interests of particular institutions or disciplines, but in the service of the highest standards of research quality.

This is precisely where the particular strength of our research system lies. The principle of science-driven research funding makes it possible to support highly innovative research that need not be guided by short-term expectations. In doing so, it creates space for fresh ideas, unexpected discoveries and groundbreaking advances.

Those who claim that science-driven research funding is a form of political control, or that the self-governance of researchers is an expression of ideological bias, confuse cause and effect. It is not political influence that safeguards the quality of research. It is precisely scholarly independence that has enabled Germany to become one of the world's leading and most innovative research nations.

This makes it all the more important that research in Germany should continue to enjoy a high degree of public and political trust. For decades, the German federal government and the federal states have protected freedom of research and supported the self-governance of the research community, thereby creating the conditions for Germany's exceptionally successful research landscape. That trust is one of our country's defining strengths, underpinning both our research system and our international competitiveness.

At the same time, as an organisation that has examined its own role during the National Socialist era in depth and confronted that "deeply uncomfortable truth", we know that such trust cannot be taken for granted.⁶

Today's DFG stands in a tradition that was deliberately founded anew after the end of the Second World War – rooted in a profound commitment to our Basic Law, shaped by the federal structure of our democracy and by the principle of science-driven funding for research of the highest quality, with no restrictions on the choice of topic.

After all, once truth is subordinated to political power, it is but a short step to falsehood. Erika Mann captured what this feels like with great clarity in her political cabaret *Die Pfeffermühle* ("The Pepper Mill"), which she founded in Munich and later continued in exile in Zurich. In her 1934 song *Der Prinz von Lügenland* ("The Prince of Liar's Land"), she writes:

[...]

Lying makes you rich,

Lies are fine,

They seem to be true,

whitewash you,

They follow like a pooch on the leash.

At my home in Liars' Land

No one is allowed to tell the truth any longer, –

A motley web of lies

Encompasses our large kingdom.

⁶DFG President Professor Matthias Kleiner on the findings of the independent research group *Geschichte der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft 1920–1970*, at the concluding international conference held at Harnack House in Berlin, 30–31 January 2008.

[...]

*Lying is correct,
Lying is easy,
Everything is all right,
If you achieve it, –
Lies are the means to our end.*

*Lying will win fame
For Liars' Land,
Lies are colourful
and elegant;*

Dumb truth walks in a grey coat. [...]”⁷

The democratic renewal of the Federal Republic therefore also marked a new beginning for the freedom of research. The fact that the freedom of research and teaching enjoys special protection under the Basic Law is no historical accident. It reflects a fundamental insight: when research is directed by politics, it is not only research that loses out, but society as well.

The opposite is equally true: free and independent research also helps ensure that open societies do not allow political conviction to take the place of critically tested knowledge.

The persuasive power of the better argument

Research and democracy both rest on a form of trust that is by no means self-evident, even today: trust in the human capacity for reason and in people's willingness to make use of it. Both depend on the belief that arguments can be stronger than prejudice, knowledge stronger than ideology, and the shared search for truth stronger than any claim already to possess it.

Freedom of research not only protects the freedom to pursue inquiry, it also safeguards a particular understanding of humanity and of our society: the understanding that no one stands

⁷ Erika Mann, *Der Prinz von Lügenland* [Chanson, performed by Erika Mann, music by Eugen Auerbach]. Munich Public Library / Monacensia; Erika Mann Papers, *Die Pfeffermühle* 52. urn:nbn:de:0302-72494 (own translation).

above the force of reasoned argument, that knowledge remains open, and that criticism is not an attack but a committed contribution to progress.

This understanding also defines the DFG. Through its commitment to science-driven research funding, it champions the excellence, self-governance and freedom of research whose outcomes must never be predetermined.

These principles are not open to negotiation. They form the foundation of our research system. And they are equally among the foundations of our liberal democracy.

That is why we must speak out clearly whenever the freedom of research is to be curtailed under the pretext of protecting it.

Research in Germany has a powerful voice. Let us use it.

Let us stand together in defence of the freedom and independence of research, the autonomy of our research institutions and the open, democratic order that makes all this possible in the first place.

Free and independent research cannot guarantee a faultless society.

But without it, there can be no society capable of recognising and correcting its own mistakes.

That is why we defend the freedom of research.

Not only for the sake of research.

But for the sake of freedom.

Thank you very much.