

Navigating the 'grey zone': academic collaboration and research on/in Russia during geopolitical crisis

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Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and attack on Ukraine in 2022 have led to widespread sanctions being placed on Russia by the European Union, including sanctions related to academic cooperation. National governments, supranational bodies, science academies and research institutions as well as publishers have likewise formed policies suspending and restricting collaboration regarding Russia-related research. These policies are, however, not straight forward and there are many practical and ethical questions that individual researchers must ask themselves. At Finnish Geography Days 2023 in Joensuu, a panel was dedicated to discussing some of these questions. This article summarizes main themes discussed during the panel and sheds light on the multiple ways researchers experience and navigate the 'grey zone' of academic collaboration and research on/in Russia in the current geopolitical context. The article emphasizes the necessity of further discussing the effectiveness and impact of the sanctions and restrictions: Are they reasonable? Who benefits from them, and who suffers?

Keywords: geography, academic collaboration, research, sanctions, Russia, ethics

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Introduction

After Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022, the European Union (EU) quickly agreed to place sanctions on Russia. While gas, oil, and sports have been attracting much of the focus in the public debate, other sanctions, like those related to education and research (see EC 2022) have been going under the radar. We acknowledge that research-related sanctions might not be viewed the most pressing issue regarding the war in Ukraine. For those working outside the academic field it probably ranks at the bottom, if noticed at all. However, for

those working on topics related to Russia it has had a considerable impact, such as loss of funding, collaboration, and necessary fieldwork. While most seem to agree that academia should not be exempt from the sanctions, there is a great deal of confusion regarding their effectiveness and how they should be implemented in practice. Additionally, national governments, supranational bodies (such as European University Association), science academies and research institutions as well as publishers have formulated their own guidelines regarding collaboration with Russian academic institutions and Russian-based scholars as well as publishing and travel to Russia (Kangas *et al.* 2023).

So, how do we approach collaboration with Russian-based researchers and research on/in Russia? The academic boycotts, their moral implications and effectiveness have already been discussed (*ibid.*). Our focus is primarily on the individual level: How should scholars navigate the new geopolitical reality in which research activities are being impacted by EU level academic sanctions and various guidelines, leaving room for interpretation and individual decision making. At Finnish Geography Days 2023 (Maantieteen päivät), held at Joensuu campus, University of Eastern Finland, in November 2023, a panel was devoted to this topic. Some of the concrete questions asked from the panelists were: Is it possible to do (objective) research in Russia? Is it ethical to do research in Russia? Is it safe for us and Russians if we do fieldwork in Russia? Can we study Russia from a distance and still do relevant research? Can we publish in Russian based journals? Should we try to keep up relations with Russian partners and colleagues?

So far, there has been a wide range of academic sanctions, including funding of joint research and educational programs, projects and grants, as well as bans on collaboration with Russian academic institutions and travel to Russia. The European Commission has also restricted knowledge transfers (O'Brian 2023), and more than a dozen of the world's large academic publishers have stopped selling their services to Russia, closing the door on 97,5% of all journal and databases for Russian scholars (Jack 2022). Not offering large EU funding opportunities for Russian universities and Russian-based scholars seems like an obvious consequence of Russian aggressions. However, there is much more confusion regarding how individual researchers can and should align themselves with the sanctions and the ethics of doing research. Some academics find that sanctions can be the only, albeit not easy, thing to do (see Smith 2022), yet, others have questioned whether academic boycotts even work (see Newman 2016). Dubrovskiy and Yarovoy claim, for instance, that deglobalization of academic knowledge production in Russia will serve the interests of the regime (Kangas *et al.* 2023).

If the situation persists, there is concern about the potential impact of years of (academic) isolation on our understanding of Russia. It is not only our comprehension of Russia that is at stake, but also our understanding of some of the greatest challenges we face, such as climate change, given that Russia's Arctic regions are cornerstones in research on climate change (Doloiio & Vanderlinden 2020; Mortensgaard 2023). Some may remember when Kremlinology and Sovietology were studied at universities. Information was so scarce that analysis was, at best, qualified estimates and at worst guesswork. Growing up on either side of the Berlin War could mean complete opposite perceptions of events (Megoran 2023). Today, we face a similar situation with North Korea, the country is so isolated that North and South Koreans have trouble understanding each other although they speak the same language (Hamad 2018).

Another concern is what will happen in the long term when collaboration with Russian-based scholars is minimal and not funded. Last year Vorbrugg and Bluwstein (2022, 2) argued that within geography there is a "lopsided politics of knowledge about Ukraine". They supported their argument by highlighting the lack of both Ukrainian affiliated academics in English language journals and a lack of articles dealing with Ukraine. The latter will undoubtedly rise in the years to come with all the focus that has been on Ukraine, the war, and the possible EU and The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) memberships – but inhere they point towards another problem. Essentially, they argue that we need Ukrainians (based in Ukraine) to play a bigger role in research on Ukraine to avoid reproducing general knowledge at the expense of "context-sensitive knowledge." (Vorbrugg & Bluwstein 2022, 2) Furthermore, the research regarding Ukraine will be done in the context of the war, thus producing screwed images of Ukraine. The same may be true for Russia. The decrease in research on Russia, research funding and collaboration with Russian-based scholars will create a distorted image of Russia.

In sports, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has recommended that Russian (and Belarussian) athletes may compete as individuals in neutral outfits, meaning no flags or affiliation visible (Le Monde 2023), a practice that also exists in academia – Russians may appear in co-authored articles as independent researchers. The EU has taken one step further and wants anti-war declarations from Russian athletes if they are to compete (Crane 2023). We have seen members of the academic community in Russia speak up against the narrative that Kremlin has been pushing regarding the war. In the beginning of the war in 2022 a group of Russian scientists published an open letter in which they criticized the war and claimed to have 7400 signatures in protest of the war and the isolation it brings (University World News 2022). However, with Russia's new law curtailing freedom of speech (Troianovski & Safronova 2022) it does not seem ethical to demand such an approach in academia – or in sports for that matter – where individuals must openly declare they are against the war. The Russian Union of Rectors was also fast in their responds to the open letter, and soon after it was made public, they came out with an official statement backing Putin's war in Ukraine (O'Malley 2022).

Although the anti-war declaration is out of the question, there are other elements from the world of sport we in academia might learn from. Ukraine have now lifted a ban allowing Ukrainian athletes to compete against Russians, as long as they do so under neutral banner (Melkozerova 2023). As such not groundbreaking, but similar to what the IOC suggested. Yet, what is interesting here is the reasoning: "athlete's career stops if they do not compete" (Melkozerova 2023). Can a similar argument be made for studies regarding Russia? Do academic careers end? Or more importantly, does knowledge about Russia end if we do not do research in Russia or with Russian-based scholars?

Reflections from the panel discussion

In the panel, there was a consensus that we should continue learning about Russia and conducting research on Russia. Given the radical and rapid transformations taking place in the country, it is important to understand what is happening both at the state level and at the grassroots level in society. While foreign and domestic journalists continue to work in Russia, the best they can, and data is available through various media and social media platforms, research cannot rely solely on these sources of information. Knowledge produced with rigorous scientific methods is still essential.

The panelists connected the acquisition of research-based information from Russia with the necessity of traveling to the country and conducting fieldwork. For instance, online interviews will only get us so far and ethnographic knowledge crucial in the current situation is generated through on-site presence and a deep understanding of the field. In the realm of physical geography and earth sciences, information derived from and about Russia is invaluable, for instance, for climate change and permafrost research. The warming of the globe is the highest in the Arctic and half of the Circumpolar Arctic area is in Russia. Data is required, for instance, for the time series previously collected in Russia's Arctic locations.

The panelists raised several complications associated with acquiring research data and traveling to Russia. Firstly, national recommendations concerning travel vary. In accordance with the guidelines of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, Finnish universities do not endorse travel to Russia for their researchers (e.g. University of Helsinki 2023; University of Eastern Finland 2022). At the University of Eastern Finland, travel to Russia is permitted only when absolutely necessary (UEF 2022). As travel is not categorically prohibited, the decision of whether to travel remains with individual researchers. Most panel participants opted not to travel to Russia due to moral concerns, such as not wanting to visit a country attacking another sovereign state, concerns for personal safety (including public anti-war statements and possessing Russian citizenship) and the safety of the informants (talking to a foreign researcher might cause them harm), canceled funding, and practical obstacles like ineffective travel insurance and credit cards. However, some viewed it as their professional responsibility to visit Russia, to observe its current state and evolving dynamics. The panelists also mentioned the option of visiting Russia during personal time outside of working hours. Yet, the collection and utilization of data obtained during such personal visits would raise serious questions regarding ethical conduct of research.

One proposed solution to this dilemma is to collaborate with scholars based in Russia. The panelists noted that while joint studies are necessary this is increasingly challenging. The Finnish Ministry of

Education and Culture recommends abstaining from all research collaboration with Russian partner organizations. Individual researchers can still communicate with each other without funding or projects (OKM 2024). Therefore, engaging in collaboration with individual scholars is highly problematic as it is not possible to compensate them for their work. The panelists also pointed out that being an independent scholar puts the Russian-based researchers in an uncertain position. For instance, they might risk their positions at universities, publishing as an unaffiliated scholar might not help advance their careers, and traveling to conferences abroad incurs significant expenses. It is hypocritical having Russian-based researchers participate in scholarly activities as independent scholars, despite everyone being aware of their institutional affiliations, one of the panelists pointed out. In the field of physical geography and earth sciences, the participation of Russian scholars as representatives of their Russian institutions in international conferences outside the EU, along with their collaborations with non-EU partners, adds another layer of complexity to the situation.

In this context, the panelists deliberated on the functionality and effectiveness of Finnish national guidelines regarding collaboration with Russian scholars and travel to Russia. The viewpoints varied. One panelist suggested that while collaboration with individual scholars who do not use their institutional affiliation should continue, it is justified to impose restrictions on collaborating with Russian academic institutions that have supported Russia's aggression in Ukraine, as indicated by their endorsement of the Ledger. It is important to keep in mind geopolitics, as Russia is actively leveraging certain scientific fields, such as energy and technology, to evade sanctions. Others pointed out that Russian academia is not monolithic, and there are scholars in Russia with official affiliations who oppose the war. In alignment with observations made in the European University Association's statement on Ukraine (EUA 2024), some panelists noted that many Russian academics, at significant personal risk, have openly criticized the invasion. Among these scholars, the academic sanctions have particularly impacted those who were frequently engaged in transnational collaborations before the war. They now find themselves constrained within the Russian academic landscape and would greatly benefit from international partnerships to maintain their engagement and contributions to international scholarly discourse and publications. Furthermore, there are studies indicating that academic sanctions often fail to achieve their intended effects, which raises doubts about the benefits derived from these particular sanctions and restrictions.

It became evident during the panel discussion that the academic sanctions and national recommendations affect not only researchers but also other academic roles. One of these roles is that of a journal editor. No guidelines exist for journals regarding the publication of works by Russian scholars. The editor-in-chief of Fennia, shared a dilemma they faced when reviewers refused to assess a work written by a Russian-based researcher. They sought the panelists' opinion on how to proceed as an editor for an international journal in such cases. Ultimately, a journal should evaluate the quality of research regardless of whether the author is affiliated with a Russian university or elsewhere. The panelists agreed that such situations are challenging. One suggested following one's own moral compass: When clear guidelines are lacking, individuals must decide whether a study constitutes reliable research or something else. As the line between genuine scholarly work and propaganda is thin, one potential solution would be for Russian authors to articulate their position on the war in Ukraine. Some panelists emphasized instead that a researcher's professional identity should be rooted in being ethical. The work of researchers should therefore be evaluated based on its quality and ethical standards, regardless of the researcher's nationality, institutional ties or country of residence. In terms of publishing, some panelists also pondered whether they are allowed or will be able to publish works co-authored with Russian-based scholars, based on long-term research and collaboration.

The panel discussion also highlighted the profound personal impact that the war in Ukraine and the academic sanctions and restrictions had on the participants. The panelists' comments reflected a sort of dark cloud over Russia and one's personal relationship with the country – which, for several of them, had been the primary focus of research throughout their careers and a home for longer or shorter periods of time. Some panelists expressed feelings of self-doubt and questioned their value as researchers. They posed questions such as: Why did I, like so many of us, not see what was coming in Russia? Did we miss the signs, or did we misinterpret them? Was I sound enough in saying that something disturbingly was happening in Russia? Is our research read and are our voices heard? What

will my future relationship with Russia be? Do I want to go back to Russia and do research? Can I go back? Have I written or said anything about the war that could make it dangerous for me to go to Russia? Our Russian-based panelist, on the other hand, had clearly undergone a profound emotional process of self-inquiry, as they pondered being the same scholar with consistent methodological and ethical positions, regardless of their social or institutional status within the state.

The panel proposed some strategies to navigate the challenges posed by 'the new reality.' It is possible to continue studying what is happening in Russia through Russian-speaking migrants in Finland and everyday transnationalism at the Finnish-Russian border, since many societal processes occurring in Russia are also present among Russian speakers here. Sustaining transnational connections among researchers focused on Russia would necessitate organizing online and in-person meetings in neutral countries to network, share ideas, experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Given the significant number of Russian scholars relocating abroad due to the war, establishing institutions for the Russian academic diaspora in Finland and the EU could ensure their continued research activities and access to funding. Additionally, collaboration with Russian scholars in exile is possible through networks and organizations that they have already established in several countries. Also, Russian journals like *Laboratorium* have shifted their operations outside Russia to safeguard academic freedom and enable the discussion and dissemination of research on Russia-related topics.

Exiting the grey zone

There is a need to deal with the mess related to academic sanctions and fund research on Russia. (Comment by panelist)

The reflections from the panel discussion 'Geographical Research in Geopolitical Crisis' at the Finnish Geography Days 2023 illustrate how academic collaboration and research on/in Russia have become a grey zone in the current geopolitical context. It highlights some of the ways scholars experience and navigate the academic sanctions and restrictions imposed by the EU and national bodies on collaboration with Russian-based scholars, as well as conducting research in Russia. The issues raised by some of Finland's and Russia's leading experts in Russia-related social science research call for the need to discuss the sanctions and guidelines within the academic institutions as well as with national and EU-level decision-makers. Discussions are needed about the practical implementation of the sanctions and restrictions in different academic roles. Yet, most importantly, elaborations are needed about the effectiveness and gain achieved with the sanctions and the restrictions: Are they reasonable? Who benefits from them, and who suffers?

Currently, individual scholars have little power over deciding over their own work when it comes to collaborating with Russian-based scholars and doing research in Russia that could benefit both international and national academic audiences, as well as politicians, officials, and societies at large. The war in Ukraine has already created a border between Russia and Europe. Academic sanctions and restrictions will only solidify that border, bringing us back to Cold War times – a period which interestingly was devoid of academic boycotts. Some long-term interpersonal and cooperative connections have already been lost beyond mending. Our fear is that we risk losing familiarity and knowledge with and about Russia, especially now when so many journalists are being kicked out of Russia (Chiappa 2023). The lack of information can pose a serious risk to geopolitical relations, hinder efforts to combat climate change, and create knowledge gaps in all the other areas where geography plays an active role, if we give up on research in and on Russia. It will only be a matter of a few years before Europe and Russia start to get estranged. Megoran (2023) argues that geography is the cause of Russia's attack, but he also says that geography can be the key to ending it. Thus, it is important that we continue our endeavors to provide solid and relevant geographical research on Russia – but how?

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