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New Research Network for Conflict Research on Eastern Europe

With a nationwide research network funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), six research institutes will join forces over the next four years to connect and advance German research on conflict in Eastern Europe. Particularly in the context of political transformations in the wake of the Cold War, the region has witnessed violent conflicts, some of them still unresolved. Russia's war on Ukraine is the most recent example. The project will now take account of the changed research questions and research conditions that result from this new war.

Eastern Europe has been a focus of peace and conflict research for many years. Nowhere else in the world since the end of the Cold War have there been so many wars of secession – some of them unresolved to this day – and newly founded states. Russia's war on Ukraine is a shocking reminder of this. Now in particular, we should tackle conflict constellations but also cooperation dynamics in Eastern Europe, Southeast Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus. For example, while the conflict over Transnistria in the Republic of Moldova has not yet been settled, in recent years pragmatic solutions have been found for everyday problems, and open communication channels have been established between Chişinău and Tiraspol.

The research network 'Cooperation and Conflict in Eastern Europe: (KonKoop)' aims to explain and understand the dynamics of conflict and cooperation in this region. It will be coordinated by the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) from April 2022 on. The partner institutions within the research network are the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies in Regensburg (IOS), the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography in Leipzig (IfL), the Chair of International Relations at Friedrich Schiller University Jena (FSU Jena), Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development (HNEE), and the Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History in Potsdam (ZZF).

'In Germany we have excellent research and a lot of practical knowledge on different conflicts in Eastern Europe, but as yet this is scattered across different locations and thus not sufficiently recognised at international level. The purpose of the research network is to integrate all of this expertise', explains ZOiS Director Gwendolyn Sasse. 'Russia's war on Ukraine challenges us to connect and communicate research on Eastern Europe, conflict and migration in an even more concerted way.'

In five thematic fields, researchers in this project want to find out how conflicts come about in Eastern Europe, what actors are involved, what factors contribute to escalation and de-escalation, but also what conditions guarantee security or enable cooperation.

- Under what circumstances do political reconfigurations like the dissolution of the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia trigger violent conflicts?
- What role do ethnic or religious attributions play?
- How do economic interests contribute to the development of conflicts or their resolution?
- What are the effects of environmental change and the scarcity of resources?

- What factors influence the scope for peace negotiations and the implementation of peace accords?
- How can security in Europe be reconceptualised and institutionalised in future?

Questions like these need to be addressed in a comparative way not only for different places but also for different times and conflict stages, and this calls for expertise from different disciplines.

‘The partners in the network each address different aspects of conflict, all of which have been brought into focus by the current situation. When the public debates the dependency on Russian gas, the role of ethnic minorities, the positions taken by the different orthodox churches, or Russia’s historical justification of the war, fundamental questions within the network are addressed’, explains social geographer Sabine von Löwis. The network partners are pooling their resources and expertise in order to shed light on these relationships and render them useful for conflict resolution.

A multi-local junior research group coordinated by the IOS is of central importance for the future of conflict and peace research on Eastern Europe. The doctoral students and post-docs in this group will work closely with more experienced researchers and international partners and enhance their academic profile. Current events make it tragically clear that the expertise of young academics on Eastern Europe will be urgently needed in the future.

The research results will be gathered and made available in a data laboratory coordinated by ZOiS. In a visualisation laboratory coordinated by IfL, we want to make these results visible and comprehensible for relevant actors and the public in a way that is both accessible and critical. For both laboratories, dialogue-based communication of research results is a key principle. The same applies to cooperation with practice partners. ‘We also want to tap into the knowledge of organisations with years of experience in conflict mediation, reporting and reconstruction work. They can help us to better understand where there are needs that can be addressed in academic research, for example by contributing to the formulation of research questions’, emphasises Gwendolyn Sasse. ‘At the same time, in the context of knowledge transfer we want to look jointly for ways of making our research results useful for practical work.’

The research network with the full title ‘Cooperation and Conflict in Eastern Europe: The Consequences of the Reconfiguration of Political, Economic, and Social Spaces since the End of the Cold War (KonKoop)’ began its work on 1 April 2022. Over a period of four years, the network will receive funding in excess of 3 million euros from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) as part of its funding line on ‘Strengthening and Developing Peace and Conflict Research’.

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