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Actions speak louder than words

Dilogy on the decision of the journal *Acta Biochimica Polonica* to exclude Russian science from publishing

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For the time being, as one of only a few journals worldwide, the scientific journal *Acta Biochimica Polonica (henceforth ABP)* has decided not to accept manuscripts submitted by authors affiliated with Russian institutions. This is a strong symbolic act of solidarity with Ukraine being assaulted by Russia. The questions are, however, how this unprecedented boycott of researchers from publishing because their nation leads a criminal war could be justified, and how this harsh action is in accordance with fundamental principles of science and its system.

Keywords: Science, morality, Ukraine, Russian aggression

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A MORAL CRY

During big humanitarian crises, such as the war in Ukraine, it is natural for us as human beings but also for us as scientists to have a desire to set out our stall. While doing that from the level of the scientific community, it is extremely important not to cross the line or, in other words, not to tarnish the sanctity of the main scientific postulates. The most difficult question is what we should or should not do, and not what to think. Different people have different opinions on that and following, there is my opinion: the one of a junior member of the scientific community, a Ukrainian science student who is trying to continue with academic life during the war. Every scientist from Ukraine is indeed grateful for the initiative like the one of Acta Biochimica Polonica, to ban Russian science from publishing. First, because it is personally not easy to read publications signed by a person who potentially supports Putin's barbarian politics and may plainly support their country's regime with their work. Second, and this may weigh much more: the ban is a way to honor our Ukrainian colleges, who are not able to work and to publish when Russian bombs destroy our country. Third, at this moment, due to Russian propaganda, we Ukrainians, as a nation, have a foundation to question the validity of any Russian statement, including Russian scientific papers. The world has already evidenced Russia's urge to rewrite even history – so, why not to suspect lying also in science? Hasn't Russian credibility suffered enough due to their perpetual propaganda lies? So, should Russian science be banned just to satisfy Ukrainians? That is definitely not the point or, at least, it should not be. There is something more behind it. The goal of science is to strive for truth, and to come to scientific truth that is based on facts only. It is a harsh judgement, but Russia as such, unfortunately, has decided to become an antonym of truth. The Russian assault on Ukraine is a crime committed against humanity in general, and so it is a national crime also against the entire set of values of the scientific community in particular. Can Russian science thought to be independent from the Russian regime? It cannot! What about the few "liberal" Russian scientists who oppose the official terminology of lie and frankly call the Russian war a war? Don't they deserve to be distinguished from the rest of the society controlled by a dictator, and awarded for their efforts to speak the truth? First, also the overwhelming majority of Russian scientists do not call the war a war but following the Kremlin's propaganda also rather "a special operation". The single researchers who say the truth are a tiny minority without influence, and what is more, they do not scream "*Save Ukrainians who are dying by Russian hands*", they actually scream "*Stop hating Russia*". Why do they prioritize their country even in this situation? Probably because of the feeling of patriotism. But isn't it a contradiction in terms to be a patriot of a country that commits war crimes and genocide? What kind of patriotism is that when love to the own country means to love a country that methodologically commits a genocide against the Ukrainian nation? Should we also ban Belarusian science? Things are slightly different there. On the one hand, the percentage of people in Belarus who do their best and protest against their government decisions, is significantly higher than in Russia. These brave people show a deep desire of their nation to become part of civilized Europe. On the other hand, some parts of Ukraine are still attacked by Russia from the territory of Belarus. Russian assault is supported this way. The manifest that any help provided to Russia during the war shall be punished, seems to weigh more than any other argument! Therefore, the conclusion is that also researchers form Belarus shall share the fate of Russian scientists to be banned from the privilege to publish their results. Finally: It is not dictators who form a nation. Often, it is vice versa: a nation creates its dictator. It is surely true that not every single member of the Russian scientific community is responsible for creating the Russian regime, as well as it is true that also not every scientist supports the dictatorship in Russia. In science and democracy, however, numbers always speak a clear language. We simply can use statistics to draw conclusions. In this case, even according to the most "liberal" surveys, up to 68% of Russians support the invasion of

Ukraine (Chapkovsky, 2022). Isn't that enough to eventually stop looking for "good Russians"? Unfortunately, there are no countries, societies, or people that are equal, and the truth is, scientific journals cannot check the moral codex of each scientist who wants to publish a paper. The publication ban may be not a precise instrument for "surgical operations", but it is one of only a few effective weapons, the scientific community can use to make a point.

The "Khinzal-retaliation" of *Acta Biochimica Polonica*

"MACBETH
(…)
Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch
thee.
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation
Proceeding from the heat-oppressèd brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.
(He draws the dagger)
(…)"
William Shakespeare, The Tragedy Of Macbeth
(Mowat, 2022)

It is not known if it was a controversial discussion or a univocal *ad-hoc* decision of the Editor in Chief, the Associated Editors, and the Members of the Editorial Board of ABP to deprive Russian-affiliated researchers of one of the fundamental rights and privileges of scientists: to publish on their work. Due to the complex and radical nature of the issue, however, one can imagine that a lively discussion went on beforehand the decision – as it is now lead afterwards. Voices opposing this decision could claim that banning scientists from publishing is an unjust and outrageous act of discrimination. One also could ask what science generally has to do with real wars taking place outside the academic world, and how the boards of scientific journals can dare to be prosecutor and judge of an issue that is beyond its original realm. The realm of science is the world. I am aware that not only my former best and sorely missed critique, the late *Aleksander Koj (Anonymous, 2019)*, distinguished professor and "moral authority" at our Faculty, would remark that such a proposition is "too lofty" to mean anything. I would, as usual, disagree. The proposition means first that science is not, as some may think, disconnected to worldly issues. On the contrary. The natural habitat of science is amid societal- and even more: political affairs. The simple facts that in its frame, science usually gets organized by directives and laws, and fully financed by the State, make science formally a rather *passive* but an official political factor. Amazingly, in free and democratic societies, science enjoys the chartered right of freedom that could make it even an *active* agent – not only of ruling politics, but a representative on its own behalf: Although science is usually fully sponsored by the State, in open and free societies, Science can develop independency, and it can speak for itself! In autocratic and fascistic systems, as a part of the regime it serves, science is nothing but a marionette hanging on the threads of the ruling regime: That was the case with German science in Nazi-Germany, and it is also the case with Russian science. The unfreedom to decide and to speak publicly and freely especially in political terms has made Russian science an obedient proxy of the regime. That fact disqualifies Russian researcher to be member of the scientific community in which the freedom of speech and independent thinking are not just fundamental rights but even elementary obligations. Bluntly, referring to Russian researchers, it is not really clear if it is each the scientist or finally the regime that publishes scientific articles. What is clear is that Russian scientists are obliged to work and to publish in the best interest of the regime, as well as in their best interest to keep their jobs and freedom. Currently, it is rather unimaginable that scientists at Russian institutions could demonstrate against the Ukraine war of the Russian leader without getting terminated sooner or later. Science and the regime – in Russia today, it is the same. Sanctions against the Russian government and oligarchs shall also get directed against Russian science – but not as the eventual target: Aiming at Russian science means to hit primarily the underlying system that rules and oppresses Russia's national(istic) science. The scientific community shall think to raise the topic of missed freedom of science of Russian science anyhow. So far, it did not: at least not as openly as during the times of the Soviet fascists, although the parallelism of the nationalistic *Putinist* system is not less radical in terms of its ideological, totalitarian and anti-liberal approach that contradict all axioms of science, including its fundamental renunciation of violence.

Of all university mottos, maybe the motto of the Jagiellonian University (UJ) – represents best the spirit, the character and the major dedication not only of academia but also of science: *Plus Ratio Quam Vis (… caeca valere solet*) – reason can generally effect more than blind force (see: Wasyl, 2013). Although, at first glance this sentence may appear too "lofty" to be accepted for people dedicating their lives to science, most academics and researchers *per se* embrace and accept this proposition as a logical, axiomatic statement on their fundamental approach that requires no proof. The pathos of a creed that emanates from UJ's motto can even be understood as a moral suggestion of science to none less than the entire human race: to follow its example, and to change from a "dangerous, savage child-race" to a truly civilized species that does not strike dead the weaker neighbour to gain more territory, more resources and power, to prove an ideological, philosophical and theological superiority, or to treat own paranoid delusions of a neo-Nazi conspiracy by dropping bombs on theatres, steel factories and schools. With the heinous massacres and pointless carnages in Ukraine, Russia has not only created another *rupture in European civilization*. With this war of extermination, Russia has shifted itself into the offside of civilization, and so it contradicts all and everything academia and science stands for. Besides sports and culture, for all political systems also the importance of science for propaganda and international PR has been known for decades (Edelstein, 1997). Used as a figurehead and indication for alleged ideological superiority, in all autocratic and totalitarian systems, including the current Russian regime, national science has always played a significant role. As a sector of systemic importance, Russian science is a legitimate target, international sanctions shall aim at. Beyond science as a PR asset for the regime, national science is also an essential factor for the technological, economic, and military development of Russia. The recently burned research center in *Tver* (Farrer, 2022) was as dedicated to the final goal of Russia becoming again the "Eurasian" and even global superpower as any life science institution of the alleged empire being involved in developing biological agents like *Novichok* (Bellingcat, 2020). The leitmotif of current Russian research is not restricted on knowledge creation for the sake of science but "for the greater glory of the Russian State". Russian science supports the development

of modern missiles and warfare agents. Banning Russian science from publishing can indeed be seen as a belligerent act of retaliation for Russian atrocities with military products Russian science has contributed to. Nevertheless, the publication-ban is a rather symbolic response to atrocities committed by the sponsors of Russian scientists that in comparison to other sanctions has a low impact, but it is also a moral pointer for the message that it quite counts if science works for knowledge and progression or at the pleasure of a dictator responsible for killing innocent civilians.

Generally, soldiers firing with an *Ak-47* on civilians in *Bucha* and researchers creating applicable knowledge for a dictatorial system serve the same master and his cruel goals. The obvious different grades of immorality of these actions, however, leads to different conclusions. Unlike a lot of Russian soldiers, so far, no researcher at e.g., Lomonosov University must fear to be called a war criminal, but they must put up with the allegation to serve the system that sponsors and orders obvious heinous war crimes. Russian propaganda has claimed that there is no defense against its hypersonic missile, named *Khinzal* – "dagger". This missile is allegedly too fast to get intercepted before it detonates in his target.

The ABP publication-ban is firing back *a metaphorical Khinzal-missile* onto Russia.

The "hypersonic publication ban" of ABP was way too fast and way too precise even to get prepared for the impact. It took Russian science by surprise. Russian science did not see the counterattack coming, and it got hit before it even knew it was under attack. Nevertheless, one must not get a wrong impression, neither on the symbolic nature nor the comparably little impact of the publication boycott. Banning Russian science from publishing will neither plunge Russia into chaos nor will it create conditions for a system change. It will also not even save the life of one Ukrainian civilian, and it will not contribute any pressure to end the war. The publication embargo, as also banning Russian tennis players from the Wimbledon tournament, are little puzzle pieces in the bigger campaign to isolate the *Putinist* system where and whenever possible. Nothing more, but also nothing less. The further course and the consequences of the unprecedented step of banning Russian science from publishing, however, need to be discussed now, too. The most obvious question would be when to lift the publication ban: when a peace treaty between Ukraine and Russia will be signed, after a regime change in Russia, or after a change of the political system to a western-style democracy that indicates that also in Russia the freedom of science applies? There is more to ask. The publication ban has been established as a reaction to the Russian extermination war as an outrageous atrocity. Shall we consequently also not accept henceforth scientific articles from scientists from other countries leading wars of aggression, or is the current case unique? And if so, why? What about countries with autocratic or totalitarian regimes that are comparable to Putin's Russia in terms of disregarding human rights and applying inhuman practices? In China, an entire population group gets imprisoned in concentration camps, and in Belarus, as much as in Iran and so many other countries, dissenters get systematically persecuted and terminated. Why are these crimes not enough to place their scientists on the index? It was probably not intended, but ABP's publication ban has set a new moral standard for scientific publications. There are good reasons for the current ban of Russian science based on new moral standards. But does the spontaneous decision for this specific ban not require a general rule that is valid for all scientists but just the ones representing Russia?

That is actually a rhetorical question… A publication ban hitting researchers from all "countries of unfreedom" would change the system of scientific publications in an extreme radical way: it would hit tens of thousands of scientists from several dozen countries that would get cut off from the science publication system – but unfortunately not from getting informed on the status quo of science that may finally allow them to build WMDs like the Russian Satan-II-IBM or a new generation of nerve gas. Shall researchers working for regimes doing evil be henceforth members of the scientific community – that is known to be built on the principles of freedom and reason? It is anything but fetched too far that also valuable scientific information and knowledge from abroad help making technological items possible that one day may be used against other enemies, Russia has put on its death list – maybe us? Despite the question on how to do this practically: Shall we not better cut off scientific competitors from access to high-end and up-to-date scientific information? Can the science community of the free world really afford keeping the science system open when that means support of possible future enemies with knowledge we know already today that they may use it against us tomorrow? I would not know how to cut off scientists in hostile regimes from information that can be misused – not without censorship in publications – that no one can establish successfully (see also: Becker, 2012). A realistic and practical minimal step would be to establish ethics check-ups of publications, including the aspect of possible misuse of research and DUR. The publication ban of ABP is an outstanding example for a moral decision; also in terms of justice, as *Rawls* put it: "*Justice does not require that men must stand idly by while others destroy the basis of their existence.* "(Rawls, 1971)

Today, it may mean that exceptionally Russian researchers are *personae-non-gratae* – but what about tomorrow, or the day after? Can we generally afford in science to grant freedom for the enemies of freedom, wherever they are from?

Authors' contributions

The author of the chapter "A moral cry" is Nataliia Volushchuk, the author of the chapter "The "Khinzal-retaliation" of *Acta Biochimica Polonica*" is Gregor Becker.

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