

## Report on the IfL Research Workshop #8

### Spatially related research practice in challenging environments: Authoritarianism, conflicts and war

Leipzig, 22 March 2023 - 24 March 2023

In recent times, there has been a noticeable increase in the impact of authoritarian and reactionary tendencies worldwide, as well as the repercussions of crises and conflicts. These developments have posed significant challenges to our research efforts. Given the current situation, there has been a growing interest in how to respond effectively to such conditions in our research practices. The IfL Research Workshop #8 was organized with the aim of addressing and delving deeper into these debates. It served as a platform for the exchange of experiences and knowledge regarding field research conducted under authoritarianism, conflicts, and war. The workshop incorporated focused presentations, open discussions, and diverse examples drawn from various geographical research fields. The objective of this year's workshop, was to facilitate discussions among participants with diverse perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds, utilizing a range of practical formats. The participants have actively contributed to shaping the IfL Research Workshop #8 by sharing and discussing their experiences.

#### *Panel-Debate (Online)*

The thematic introduction of the event took place on Wednesday 22 March with an online panel debate with **Katharina Lange** (*Zentrum Moderner Orient*) and **Yuliia Soroka** (*Kharkiv National University*) under the title “Research in contexts of authoritarianism and conflict: walking the line between aims and challenges”. The two researchers with different geographic, thematic and disciplinary backgrounds discussed major challenges of research in conflictual contexts in light of their own experiences. *Katharina Lange* shared her experiences in field research, especially in Syria and Kurdistan-Iraq, and the challenges that arose both in the process of collecting data in the field and in the subsequent publication of the results. Among other things, this involved the difficult access to data as well as the difficulties of securing the safety of the cooperation partners on the ground. *Yuliia Soroka* reported on her approaches to analysing the Ukrainian media discourse about the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russian troops and people living there under constant threat of violence. Using a video about “Babushka-Z”, she showed how a Ukrainian woman became a Russian propaganda icon and demonstrated how symbolic images can be used very successfully even if incorrectly in terms of the content.

#### *EEGA Science Lounge*

On Wednesday evening, the EEGA Science lounge invited to join a debate on matters of positionality between journalism and research on such sensitive matters as the war in Ukraine in the Café Madrid, in the city centre of Leipzig, with Gesine Dornblüth and Moritz Gathmann as journalists as well as Alona Shestopalova for the research perspective. The debate was open to workshop participants as well as anyone interested in the subject. Attendees had the opportunity to engage in an extensive discussion while enjoying drinks and tapas. The topics discussed

included the role and influence of science in conflict resolution, as well as the relationship between science and journalism. Journalists provided insights on reporting from the war zone and shared their experiences of cooperating with people on the ground.

### *Storytelling 1*

The workshop at the IfL officially started on Thursday with **Bettina Bruns**, **Sofia Gavrilova** and **Nadir Kinossian** (IfL) giving short anecdotal inputs about different challenges in their fieldwork in autocratic environments. *Nadir Kinossian* discussed the ethical dilemma in research regarding obtaining difficult-to-access information from interviewees while his work in Russia. *Bettina Bruns* shared her first-hand experiences of conducting field research in the Polish-Belarusian border region. She highlighted the challenges posed by the presence of the Belarusian authoritarian state, which consistently acted in an unpredictable and arbitrary manner, significantly complicating the research conditions. She highlighted that these circumstances place a unique responsibility on researchers to ensure the safety of the local research subjects. She also related that the experience of a non-transparent authoritarian regime can also have profound emotional and affective effects on the researchers themselves. *Sofia Gavrilova* discussed the unique advantages and disadvantages she has faced in her fieldwork in Russia as a Russian citizen and Russian native speaker. She also elaborated on the specific consequences that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has had on her work, providing valuable insights into the challenges and impacts she has encountered. All three shared the perspective that they considered their chance to engage in fieldwork as a privilege. This raised the question of the various roles a researcher assumes in an authoritarian setting. As a result, they also talked about responsibilities and goals of a researcher and considered whether it is possible and even desirable to take a passive stance in their environment.

### *Panels*

The next item on the agenda was the contributions of the participants. During three panels, presenters were given a 30-minute time slot to present their research project and address questions from both the designated discussant and the plenary audience. Although - or even because of - the many different points raised on the topic of the conference, the contribution provided many ideas for exchange among the participants, also for the further course of the workshop.

The opening panel, led by **Bettina Bruns** (IfL) as the chair, focused on research conducted within the challenging context of conflict and governmental repression. The discussant for this panel was **Nadir Kinossian** (IfL).

**Lara Lundsgaard-Hansen** and **Kearny Norman** (University of Bern) started with their input on their field research on “Mega-infrastructure projects – engaging with the giant – (im)possible?”. They shared their experience that conflicts during their field work arose particularly when critical questions were being posed, which then not only puts at risk the safety of the researchers themselves, their interview partners, translators, and others involved in the research process. Regarding their own research, they also tackled ethical concerns regarding their potential political influence and explored strategies for urging supporters such as investors and governments to acknowledge the needs of those impacted by their work. The second input came from **Louis**

**Thiemann** (International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague) about “Cuba’s positioning in contemporary eco-social discourses”. He shared the personal experience that even if researchers in authoritarian settings can adopt a seemingly passive and insignificant role, their contributions can be remarkably relevant. He explained that this can be achieved for instance by publishing in a local niche journal which may serve as the sole alternative source of information on a particular place like Cuba, where mainstream channels of information exhibit disinterest, where critical local individuals face limitations in reporting, and where official media merely repeats stereotypes and clichés.

**Öcal Devran Koray** (University of Bern) shared his experiences while doing research on the “Invisible State Violence in Kurdish-Dominated Geographies in Turkey”. For this work, he had studied the Kurdish-dominated border regions from a feminist perspective exploring the connections between geopolitics, cases without legal trial, and the lack of punishment for the involved representatives of the Turkish state. He initiated a lively discussion by asking important questions such as: Does the Turkish government engage in practices that bypass the legal system? How can we investigate these practices when they are hidden and what does this tell us about the government?

The second panel set a focus on research approaches and ethics under authoritarian conditions and was chaired by **Sofia Gavrilova** (IfL). **Daniela Zupan** (University of Weimar) acted as a discussant.

**Arnisa Halili** (University of Weimar) started the panel with the presentation of her dissertation project about: “The destruction of the National Theatre in Tirana as a negotiation process of belonging and identity”. She presented her thoughts and preparations for her fieldwork on how to interview the affected people with an approach to not re-traumatizing them. **Gvantsa Gverdtsiteli** (Roskilde University, Denmark) presented her “Fieldwork under Conditions of Authoritarian, Pandemic and Hybrid Approach”. She shared her experience of conducting field research during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced her to utilize of a combination of methods and hybrid research approaches. Initially, she conducted household interviews, which required extensive preparation and involved official in-person visits. Later, she realised that conducting that survey was as a valuable entry point for her actual fieldwork. **Birtan Tonbul** (Friedrich-Schiller University Jena) closed the second panel with his input on “Research in a Furnace: Reflective Collaborations within Everyday Activist Geographies under Authoritarianism”. He addressed the methodological challenges of conducting research under authoritarian conditions by emphasizing the importance of including activists in both the research design and the dissemination process to be responsive to their needs. Thereby he also highlighted the need to consider the inherent dangers of studying activists and discussed the importance of preserving data and ensuring the safety of researchers and collaborators through critical approaches within the ethnography of social movements.

The third and last panel was about reflections on research design and positionality in sensitive contexts and chaired by **Serhii Svyharets** (IfL) with **Sabine von Löwis** (Centre for East European and International Studies – ZOIS) as the discussant.

**Valeria Lazarenko** (Leibniz Institute for Spatial Social Research (IRS)) started with her presentation about “Researching the impact of war on Ukrainian population. Ethical, methodological, and epistemological considerations”. She focused on the challenges faced by her and her team in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine. She highlighted that right after the

beginning of the Russian invasion in February 2022, they realised a need for immediate considerations and conceptualizations among academia and policymakers to understand the unfolding events and the societal reactions. Driven by the urgency of the situation, they had very limited time for the project preparation, which brought them into a more reactive approach. As researchers, but also people who were personally affected by the situation, they had to navigate the blurred distinction between home which was under attack and the field. For this, they utilized subjectivity as a research tool and used it for validation when they later had the time to reflect properly upon the data and the process of data collection. To seek collaboration with non-Ukrainian colleagues helped them to deal with the emotionally intense nature of the context and to find a calmer, more objective perspective while also providing valuable validation and suggestions for improvement.

The last input came from **Alina Strzempa** (University of Regensburg). Her project, titled "Poetics of Industrial Landscapes: Comparing the Donbas and Upper Silesia" was an study of the cultural and literary aspects of both regions, considering them as industrial borderlands with shared historical dependencies. The project, originally planned since 2012, encountered challenges and uncertainties due to the violent conflicts in Donbas from 2014 and since 2022. The presentation elaborated on the project's impact following the outbreak of military conflict in the Donbas and Ukraine, delving into the growing complexity and ethical questions that arose as a result.

### *Storytelling 2*

As with the storytelling session the previous day, **Sabine von Löwis** (ZOiS) and **Daniela Zupan** (University of Weimar) also shared their different experiences of fieldwork in places affected by authoritarianism, conflict, and war. The brief insights provided the participants with many ideas for the further discussion during the World Café and for the informal exchanges throughout the conference.

### *World Café*

The Storytelling 2 was followed by the World Café. During several rounds of discussions at the four different tables, participants had the opportunity to discuss various aspects of the topic of research in contexts of authoritarianism and conflict in a relaxed atmosphere with one of the panellists at each table. There was the possibility to join in the discussion at the tables in four rounds of 20 minutes each and to record ideas, impressions, and results on the paper tablecloth. Each participant had the chance to visit all the tables on offer. The results and questions from the World Café were later incorporated into the joint reflection session and the final discussion.

**Sabine von Löwis** (ZOiS) invited to her **World Café table 1** to **discuss topics of the safety and stability of the people involved**. The initial basis for the discussion was the question of how to evaluate the security situation for oneself as well as for others involved. One of the approaches was to include local people living in the field and to listen to their judgement. The question that followed was how to ensure safety in all phases of the work in the best possible way. Several other considerations were highlighted, including whether to name contributors, data security measures such as protected notebooks and encrypted cloud storage, involving locals in assessing sensitivity before publication, determining the best approach for publishing, and always having contingency plans (Plan B or C) in the case of unexpected challenges, problems and risks.

With **Bettina Bruns (IfL)** at **table 2, inputs on Ethics - positionality, legitimation and moral aspects** that had already been touched during her input at the storytelling the day before could be followed up. One pressing question that arose was how to effectively address and navigate the complexities of colonial guilt. Recognizing the significance of this issue, the participants engaged in thoughtful conversations on acknowledging historical injustices and determining appropriate ways to approach research with sensitivity. Participants contemplated opportunities and challenges of ensuring a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to research, particularly in the context of marginalized communities and underrepresented perspectives. Another aspect of the discussion was the emphasis on collaboration with activists. The participants discussed the value of engaging with those directly involved in social movements and grassroots activism, incorporating their valuable insights, and lived experiences into the research process. This collaborative approach not only helps to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding but also amplifies the voices of those working for social change. Questions about **research practice regarding competences and logics in authoritarian contexts** were discussed at **table 3** with **Nadir Kinossian (IfL)** and **Daniela Zupan (University of Weimar)**. Participants at the table shared their different experiences and discussed how fundamentally different the challenges are in each context, and therefore also the strategies and responses to them.

At World Café **table 4, Serhii Svyharets (IfL)** addressed questions around practical research challenges when doing **research in conflict zones**. The discussion centred around three distinct phases: pre-conflict, conflict, and post-conflict. Participants explored research challenges that arise in each phase and exchanged ideas on how to effectively navigate them. By focusing on these three phases, participants gained valuable insights into the complexities and intricacies of conducting research in conflict zones, enabling them to develop strategies and approaches that are sensitive to the unique challenges of each phase.

#### *Joint reflection session: Insights from the IfL-workshop against the backdrop of a guide for fair and conflict-sensitive research*

**Sara Frey** and **Lara Lundsgaard Hansen** (both *Centre for Development and Environment, University of Bern*) conducted a collaborative reflection session of the workshop and on research practices in challenging environments. During this session, they presented an initial version of a guide they had developed before within their team. The purpose of the guide was to enhance the fairness and sensitivity of research design in the face of conflicts, as well as to provide researchers with a conceptual framework, general approaches, and a compilation of literature on practical tools, guidelines, and methods. Right from the beginning of the workshop, Sara and Lara briefly introduced their project and expressed their intention to get new insights for their "guide under construction." To facilitate this, a pin board was available throughout the workshop, allowing participants to contribute their own ideas and concepts. This opportunity was widely utilized, resulting in a substantial collection of ideas on the pin board. During the joint reflection session, the ideas and concepts that had been gathered on the pin board were discussed. This enabled a thematic organization of the inputs received over the course of the workshop, providing a valuable framework for further discussions and developments.

Several key themes emerged, including general considerations such as carefully communicating research titles and the need to support partners effectively. The importance of decolonizing and

de-imperializing research practices was also highlighted. Publishing in local publications, ensuring the protection of sensitive information, and fair funding distribution were among the specific topics addressed. Practical considerations like having emergency numbers, evacuation plans, mental health resources, and financial support for assistance were also discussed. Ethical dilemmas related to partners' varying perspectives on ethics, language hierarchies, and data safety during fieldwork were explored. The pin board served as a rich source of ideas and suggestions, providing a comprehensive overview of the workshop participants' collective knowledge and experiences. The joint reflection session enabled productive discussions and set the stage for future advancements in research practices in challenging environments.

### *Outlook*

This year, practical research questions and informal discussions were once again at the forefront of the IfL Research Workshop. In a productive environment, the participants were able to broaden their horizons regarding future research in challenging contexts.

The workshop made it obvious that there is a lack of practical knowledge, especially among institutions and funding agencies of field research, on how to prepare researchers for work in authoritarian and conflict regimes. This led to the idea of jointly developing a guide to close this knowledge gap and to provide practical recommendations for action.

We would like to thank all participants and contributors of the IfL Research Workshop #8 for the stimulating discussions and contributions during the two days of the event. This year, too, we received a very positive overall response in the aftermath of the event. In particular, the practical work within the framework of the World Café tables was emphasised. We will, of course, consider any constructive criticism expressed for the planning of the IfL Research Workshop #9.

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### *References*

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