

Five Years of Academy in Exile
Scholarly freedom today

29.06.2022

For five years, the Volkswagen Foundation, Mellon Foundation, and Open Society Foundations have been supporting Academy in Exile, a haven for academics who have had to leave their home countries for political reasons. Scholars from Turkey, Hungary, Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine, among other countries, find a new academic context at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities in Essen (KWI), Universität Duisburg-Essen (UDE), Freie Universität Berlin (FU Berlin), and Forum Transregionale Studien (FTS).

“Exile does something not only to the people who have to leave their home countries, but also to their scholarship and to the academic system of the host country,” said Kader Konuk, director of Academy in Exile and professor of Turkish Studies at UDE, at a lecture in May marking the founding of the Erich Auerbach Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Cologne. The literary scholar Erich Auerbach was dismissed from his professorship in Marburg in Nazi Germany in 1935. He accepted a position at the University of Istanbul and taught and researched in Turkey for eleven years. At that time, the Notgemeinschaft deutscher Wissenschaftler im Ausland, founded in 1933 by Philipp Schwartz, arranged positions for scholars in exile. Today, Academy in Exile offers threatened or displaced scholars from abroad the opportunity to continue their research and teaching in Germany. Since 2017, a total of 73 scholars, journalists, and cultural producers have received invitations.

The reason for its founding were political developments in Turkey. “Critical academics at Turkish universities were subjected to professional bans and court cases,” says Kader Konuk. “We were looking for a way to support colleagues and, at the same time, to create a forum for discussion and conducting research on academic freedom and exile scholarship.” The program's great success has meant that it is now open to applicants from all over the world. “Universities are scientific institutions that assume responsibility and that are constantly renewing themselves,” explains UDE Chancellor Professor Barbara Albert. “We are particularly concerned with supporting colleagues who are in special need of academic freedom, and at the same time we need their professional expertise and creativity and their international experience to further develop the UDE.” This summer three Afghan fellows from the fields of art and media will come to KWI. Director Julika Griem comments: “Our fellows from Turkey, Hungary, Myanmar, and Russia bring new perspectives to KWI. With the Afghan journalists, we will be able to further develop our research culture in a particularly innovative way.”

Who receives funding is determined by a selection committee in a multi-stage selection process based on academic performance and risk status. The Academy awards fellowships for a maximum of two-year guest stays in Essen and Berlin.

For the renowned Volkswagen Foundation, which co-finances the program as its largest donor, Academy in Exile is a project with a signal effect. According to Secretary General Dr. Georg Schütte, “Authoritarian regimes and terrorist wars are stealing the professional future of an entire generation of researchers. They are dispersed around the world as academic nomads. At least for a small number of these refugees, Academy in Exile is a space of protection and dialogue. The concept deserves many imitators in other countries as well.”

The Volkswagen Foundation has been involved from the beginning and is the largest funding institution of Academy in Exile. The Afghanistan program is also supported by Mellon Foundation. In addition, the Academy has received support from the Open Society Foundations, IIE-Scholar Rescue Fund, Freudenberg Foundation, and DAAD. Earlier this year, the Academy expanded its focus to include cultural and media practitioners at risk: with the support of the Allianz Kulturstiftung, an Artist-in-Residence program was initiated that is directed towards artists in the fields of film, video, sound, and visual arts whose work promotes democracy, human rights, and the freedom of speech and expression.

Further information:

Prof. Dr. Kader Konuk, Institute of Turkish Studies, Tel. 0201/18 3-4355, kader.konuk@uni-due.de