Academia’s challenges in the face of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war

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Dear European Science Editing Editors,

The European Union (EU) is at an unprecedented historical crossroad with the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine on its Eastern border. In this geo-politically complex part of the world, where European and post-Soviet value systems battle for ideological survival, to sustain geo-political and cultural influence, academics in EU and non-EU states, as well as in Russia and in post-Soviet Republics, will be most affected.

As a result of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war, Ukrainian academia will suffer. Several Ukrainian state universities have already been bombed, such as Sumy State University and Kharkiv State University. Absent socio-political stability, it is difficult to realistically envision a quick return to peace-time academic activities. Ukrainian academia has thus been set back and disadvantaged.

Russian academics might face consequences as a direct result of international sanctions while parties associated with Russian universities, or collaborating with Russian scientists, might also be affected. For example, Russian academics might be banned from submissions to journals published by nations that have imposed bans.

The most obvious assistance that academics can offer is humanitarian, especially to Ukrainian refugees. Although there is anti-war support and calls to target funding, collaborations, and the involvement of Russian scientists in global academic participation, it is important not to overly politicize viewpoints and to treat academic issues as “neutrally” as possible.

In one case, the Editor-in-Chief and Editors of an Elsevier journal title, Journal of Molecular Structure, have temporarily banned the submission of papers by Russian academics at Russian state universities. This suggests that academia is divided about whether to continue support of, or ban, Russian academics and/or institutes. However, the precedent set by that Elsevier journal does not seem to have gained traction among other journals and publishers. This may pit editorial freedom and independence against publishers’ moral/ethical stance and legal responsibilities.

This becomes increasingly important for COPE member journals, who need to provide a moral and practical explanation for their position, even more so if they are open access journals that collect article processing fees (APCs) from Russian academics. This is because such funding might be perceived as a form of financial support of the Russian state. It is unclear if receiving money from Russians or Russian-based publishers or institutions would violate any international laws pertaining to economic sanctions. The BMJ has opted for opposing sanctions.

Passionate debate is needed.

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