

No to the closure of the Russian consulate and the Russian House of science and culture; Yes to international understanding and peace!



*“Once the peoples speak for themselves,
they will quickly come to an agreement.
If we want to achieve this quickly,
we still need you and you.”*

Bertolt Brecht, Song of Solidarity

The war in Ukraine has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, fueled a global spiral of escalation, caused a massive increase in hunger worldwide, and destroyed people’s livelihoods. The violence must be stopped as soon as possible; we stand with the people, with the refugees, and with those who cannot escape the war—with all those who refuse to shoot at one another and are increasingly being forced to the front lines under abuse and torture.

A path to peace in Ukraine with Russia will come through negotiations. The priority now is to ensure that every possible measure is taken to conduct these negotiations as quickly as possible and in the best interests of the people suffering from the war. For this, it is essential that civil society take the initiative. In this spirit, we at the ASStA see it as our responsibility to foster international understanding among fellow students, scholars, and the general public. As students from all countries, we have both an interest in and a right to study in peace; to this end, we want to seek dialogue with our fellow students in Ukraine, Russia, and around the world to develop perspectives on this issue and build a cross-border community of shared interests based on international solidarity.

Negotiations, confidence-building measures, and friendship among peoples—rather than war—are the only hope for humanity. The pressing challenges facing humanity cannot be solved in isolation at the national level: overcoming climate change, poverty, and inequality by creating conditions that ensure human dignity. Cooperation for sustainable development—as a source of cultural enrichment for all sides, including our fellow students from Ukraine and Russia—is a historical and civilizational necessity.

Peace is not possible without controversy and requires, above all, discussion and debate between power blocs that are in opposition to one another. Overall, we believe it is essential that cultural, student, and academic exchange at all levels be promoted and facilitated, rather than demonized and hindered. We therefore consider the closure of the Russian House of Science and Culture in Berlin—which served as a cultural and event center—to be counterproductive, as is the closure of the Russian consulate in Bonn. Predictably, the Russian side subsequently closed the Goethe Institutes as well as the German consulate in St. Petersburg, a move that merely leads to further mutual isolation. Incidentally, neither the German nor the Russian government relies on cultural institutes for

espionage. Cultural institutes dedicated to promoting intercultural dialogue remain valuable for fostering mutual understanding and overcoming stereotypes, even when they are part of state cultural policy.

The closure of the consulate also makes it significantly more difficult to obtain travel and residence permits. This complicates opportunities for exchange and, in particular, the ability of Russian people to reside in Germany—including those who wish to refuse to participate in the war and come to Germany on, for example, a student visa. Studying is one way to avoid being drafted into the army; everyone who comes to the Federal Republic of Germany needs the consulates. We need this opportunity to build an internationalist vision for peace.

There are historical examples illustrating the importance of international understanding in times of war. Cultural and academic exchanges served as a catalyst for periods of rapprochement and détente, which—despite the genocidal war waged by the U.S. in Vietnam and during times of extreme nuclear tension and danger—led to the subsequent destruction of over 80 percent of the world's nuclear weapons and the establishment of a system of collective security. Existing connections and dialogue in science and culture facilitated negotiations at the government level.

The question of how we address climate change, preserve the natural foundations of life, and ensure a future worthy of human dignity is bigger than any of us. To achieve this, we need our Russian and Ukrainian colleagues—and they need documentation. We need international research to advance climate science. Specifically, we need Russian research on polar research and on all issues related to permafrost in Siberia; otherwise, the outlook is bleak for everyone. Reversing the suspension of scientific cooperation and reestablishing such partnerships offers an opportunity to chart positive, shared post-war prospects. Focusing on such common interests is a way to move beyond the logic of confrontation in favor of solving the pressing challenges facing humanity.

The war in Ukraine has already lasted longer than World War I—4½ years—and has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. War means unimaginable suffering every day; the closure of cultural institutions and consulates does not directly endanger human lives. Yet precisely because of the unimaginable horror of war, every initiative that can contribute to peace in any way must be undertaken.

Those who want peace must talk to one another. We call for the immediate reopening of the Russian consulate in Bonn and the Russian House, as well as the continued operation of the Goethe-Institutes and German consulates in Russia. We call for the immediate resumption of academic cooperation and city partnerships, and as the AStA of the University of Cologne, we will seek exchanges with student bodies and universities in Russia, particularly in our sister city, Volgograd.

Civil society and political dialogue and relations are especially crucial when weapons speak and reason sleeps. If peace initiatives must always yield to security interests, they are doomed to failure from the start. Legitimate security interests must accommodate peace initiatives; the initiative for understanding must not be forced to yield to security requirements.

To build peace, we need a vision for the future—for the post-war era—so that a peace agreement can be reached based on that vision. Civil society perspectives must highlight opportunities for cooperation toward a better world, rather than mutual dehumanization. Only in this way are security and development possible.

Those who want peace must prepare for peace.

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