

A Global Presence

A hub for globalization in the German humanities and social sciences: The Max Weber Foundation in times of academic and geopolitical crises

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In many parts of the world, liberal democracies and open societies have come under pressure. Authoritarian regimes are gaining strength, academic freedom is under threat, and global geopolitical power dynamics are in flux. The fact that this has fundamentally altered the conditions for having a global presence has led the Max Weber Foundation (MWS) to pursue its academically driven, transparent, and democratic research commitment with even greater determination. Rooted in an open and democratic society in its home country, the MWS aims to continue serving as a hub for academic networking and transcultural dialogue, academic freedom, and collaborative research in the humanities and social sciences in its host countries.

The MWS occupies a unique position within the German academic system. It is the only German research institution that conducts research abroad on a permanent basis. The institutes within the MWS conduct and promote cutting-edge research in the humanities and social sciences with a focus on history and regional studies, while also incorporating other, smaller disciplines. Within the framework of its statutory mandate, the institutes define their research programs independently. Research projects are often multidisciplinary and internationally comparative, as well as transcultural, transregional, and globally oriented. Feedback to the German academic system is ensured through the (fixed-term) appointments of directors, academic staff, and advisory boards; through programs to support academic careers; and through academic activities that the institutes carry out jointly with researchers in Germany.

As unique multipliers of German social sciences and humanities abroad, the MWS institutes maintain contacts in their host countries to benefit the German academic community. They offer early-career researchers excellent working conditions and funding formats designed to facilitate a career in the national and international research landscape. Researchers from Germany receive the best possible access to local research resources as well as opportunities for collaboration in the host countries and neighboring regions. In these collaborations, the institutes position themselves, on the one hand, as academic beacons that uphold and guarantee academic freedom and liberal democratic values—even amid changing political conditions in their host countries. On the other hand, they act as bridge-builders and seek to promote mutual understanding between Germany and the host country. Long-term relationships based on mutual respect and trust are of inestimable value, particularly where political tensions threaten academic freedom or a troubled history complicates dialogue.

As a foundation currently comprising ten institutes and a regional research network, the MWS is committed to the principle of “cooperation in and through diversity.” In an intensive dialogue on the concrete implementation of this principle, the foundation's governing bodies developed its Strategy 2030, adopted in 2020. Against the backdrop of new geopolitical and science policy challenges, the foundation has since proactively refined its strategy.

Objectives, Areas of Action, and Formats

Geopolitical, socio-economic, and technological upheavals pose major challenges to societies worldwide. In this context, internationally connected social sciences and humanities, as they are organized in our foundation, are more important than ever. As seismographs for new developments, the MWS institutes bring together insights and perspectives from different regions of the world. Supported by effective science communication, their research findings and those of their partners in the respective regions contribute to a reflection on complex issues in a globalized world. At the same time, the institutes' work counteracts tendencies toward isolation that narrow academic discourse in numerous countries and draws attention to regional dynamics and internal logics that sometimes run counter to global developments.

Within the foundation-wide context, the institutes address relevant research topics from both historical and contemporary perspectives. These include cultural heritage and memory, empires and migration, transcultural interconnections, inequality and social cohesion, violence and war, infrastructure and the environment, gender, religion and knowledge, as well as technological, media, and societal transformations. The MWS ensures the high quality of its work through the institutes' academic advisory boards, as well as through regular external evaluations.

Federal funding for the MWS and its institutes enables the operation and development of sustainable and cross-border research infrastructures within the limits of available budgetary resources. New fields of research are also explored through third-party funded projects.

In Germany, the MWS sees itself as embedded in a research landscape in which other institutions committed to internationalization operate (Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Maria Sibylla Merian Centers for Advanced Studies, DAAD, etc.). The MWS maintains close dialogue with them to explore synergies and collaborations while simultaneously emphasizing its unique features.

The goal of its strategic development is to further expand the outstanding achievements in research and career advancement made to date. This further enhances the strengths of diversity which result from the institutes' autonomy and their different operational contexts. At the same time, the goal is to tap into the innovative potential arising from more intensive collaboration among the institutes. Accordingly, since 2020, five strategic focus areas have been at the center of the Foundation's work: internationalization, career advancement, digital transformation, science communication, and internal networking.

I. Internationalization

Internationalization is a central strategic priority for the MWS. In line with its mission, it focuses on expanding and maintaining sustainable research infrastructures in selected regions worldwide. In times of academic and geopolitical crises, the foundation responds flexibly to challenges and establishes new host countries, particularly where they are of interest to the German humanities and social sciences.

Within Europe, the MWS has a strong presence with its institutes in Rome, Paris, London, Warsaw, and Istanbul. In Eastern Europe, it has restructured its activities since 2022 in response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. In 2024, it closed the GHI Moscow and instead established research centers in Helsinki (Finland), Tbilisi (Georgia), Vilnius (Lithuania), and Lviv (Ukraine). Outside Europe, a new institute was established in the form of the Max Weber Forum for South Asian Studies in Delhi. In addition, the GHI Washington was able to sustainably expand its Pacific Regional Office in Berkeley. In

Africa, the Foundation maintains a presence through the GHI Paris's participation in the Merian- Kolleg MIASA in Accra (Ghana) and the Cairo office of the Beirut Institute of Oriental Studies.

Even in the face of scarce resources, the Foundation remains committed to its goal of further internationalization and supports corresponding initiatives by its institutes, currently in Latin America and the Indo-Pacific. It also promotes cross-institutional collaboration, preferably through the competitive instrument of Transnational Research Groups. These are developed in collaboration with academic partners in Germany and abroad in order to explore new research areas.

The following criteria apply to the Foundation Board's prioritization of such initiatives:

- the strategic research potential of the country/region for German social sciences and humanities;
- consideration of global academic and geopolitical developments;
- a clear connection to MWS's mission (research and support for early-career researchers);
- appropriate and structure-building formats that enable sustainable cooperation locally and in the region;
- coordination with funding initiatives of national and international partner institutions such as Maria Sibylla Merian Centers or the DAAD.

II. Career Development

Through their close integration with the German academic and university system, the MWS institutes offer internationally oriented researchers in the early stages of their careers unique research and working conditions, which typically translate into excellent career prospects. To date, we have consistently succeeded in attracting the best minds as research staff. Upon their return from MWS host countries, they make a significant contribution to the internationalization of Germany as a center of higher education.

The MWS strongly advocates for a law on fixed-term academic contracts that takes into account the specificities of research work abroad.

To make career development opportunities for academic and research-related staff more sustainable, the MWS relies on the following funding formats and career models:

- active support for academic and research-related careers following a successful postdoctoral or habilitation period at the institutes, provided by MWS committees, academic advisory boards, and cooperating German research institutions;
- involvement of early-career researchers in networking activities, conferences, and research projects, as well as support in building an international network that extends beyond contacts in the host country;
- offering fixed-term, competitively awarded collaborative positions at German universities and research institutions immediately following employment at one of the institutes abroad;
- improving the work-life balance within the framework of legal possibilities and in accordance with the conditions in the host country and in the German research landscape.

III. Digital Transformation

In addition to the increasingly global orientation of cutting-edge research, digitalization and artificial intelligence are shaping the development of academic research. The MWS expands Digital Humanities (DH) initiatives at German universities by drawing on relevant developments in its host countries. Conversely, it brings groundbreaking findings and projects from Germany into foreign academic systems. Furthermore, it plays a leading role in the National Research Data Infrastructures (NFDI).

Researchers at the institutes combine basic research with the ongoing digitization of research and research infrastructures. Flagship projects of the MWS focus on the digital cataloging, editing, and analysis of important source collections, AI-supported analysis of language patterns, manuscripts, statistics, and audio sources, as well as the examination of hermeneutic and ethical issues arising from the use of new technologies. Methodological expertise in the Digital Humanities is strengthened through collaborations with leading international centers, foundation-wide projects, and training programs for early-career researchers. The fields of application range from the documents of the monastic republic of Athos and migrant letters from past centuries to the documentation of Holocaust mass graves and citizen science projects.

IV. Science Communication

Dialogue with the public, society, and policymakers is an essential component of MWS's mission. Its science communication aims to integrate research findings and regional expertise into current discourses in Germany and in its host countries. At the same time, it supports and promotes foundation-wide projects in schools as well as in the public and parliamentary spheres. The annual themes established in 2025 provide an important starting point; they shed light on historical processes and events from a contemporary perspective and are addressed by the individual institutes within their respective regional contexts.

The MWS is committed to the principles of open access and open science. The foundation's own platform, perspectivia.net, and the academic blogs operated via <https://de.hypotheses.org/> are of great importance for open digital publishing in the German humanities and social sciences.

V. Internal Networking

The foundation's multi-perspectivity and the regional expertise united within the MWS hold considerable innovative potential for the discussion of fundamental methodological as well as current academic and socio-political questions. This potential is specifically harnessed through enhanced cooperation between the institutes. Among other things, the foundation's annual meetings and conferences, as well as joint research projects, serve this purpose.

While preserving the institutes' autonomy, academic collaboration focuses in particular on research topics that can be addressed by multiple institutes using comparative, transregional, and global approaches—including in interdisciplinary settings—and that may serve as the nucleus for international research networks. Connecting these networks benefits the institutes and the researchers working there just as much as the German universities and research institutions.

Networking and collaboration among the institutes also take place through joint initiatives in the field of digital transformation, foundation-wide continuing education programs for early-career researchers, and joint public relations efforts in Germany. Research-related staff are also involved through the exchange of personnel and best-practice models in administration and research management between MWS locations on the one hand and ministries, foundations, professional associations, etc., on the other (Practitioners Program).

Outlook

At a time when the exemplary nature of liberal democracy and the academic freedom resulting from its are increasingly being called into question, the MWS advocates for and defends a transparent and democratic understanding of academia and research through its overseas institutes. It intends to continue fulfilling this role as a beacon in the future and to expand it into those regions of the world where it is not yet represented. This requires coordination with other national and international research activities as well as with the relevant ministries. Adequate and reliable funding is the foundation that enables current and future institutes to fulfill their mission of research and international cooperation.