

Contemporary Threats to Academic Freedom and Democracy: Higher Education, Journalism and Human Rights

Berlin
May 13–14, 2026

Presented by

Gagarin Center at Bard College
Smolny Beyond Borders Initiative at Bard College Berlin
Center for Comparative Research on Democracy
at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Bard

Bard College Berlin
A LIBERAL ARTS UNIVERSITY

Gagarin Center



at Bard College



Smolny
Beyond Borders

Smolny Beyond Borders is a liberal arts initiative that continues and builds upon the legacy of Smolny College (formerly a joint program of St. Petersburg State University and Bard College), the longest-running dual degree program between any Russian and American institution. It was established in November 2022 by a group of former Smolny College faculty with the support of Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, and Bard College Berlin (BCB). For nearly a quarter of a century, Smolny College was unprecedented in its support of the liberal arts community in Russia. With Putin's authoritarian regime targeting progressive educational institutions, many Russian intellectuals, including former Smolny faculty members and students, have been forced to leave Russia. **The Gagarin Center for the Study of Civil Society and Human Rights** at Bard College allows Russian scholars to continue to pursue research and educational activities focused on contemporary social, economic, and human rights issues. The Center was formerly part of Smolny College. The Center now partners with Smolny Beyond Borders, an educational initiative for faculty and students who left Russia and the surrounding region due to the ongoing invasion of Ukraine and risk of political persecution. Supported by the Andrew Gagarin Trust, the Center continues to support Smolny BB faculty research on vital issues and public programming. For more information visit: <https://www.smolny.org>

Bard College Berlin is an accredited German-American university that offers intensive, transdisciplinary education in the humanities and social sciences. The student body is highly international and diverse in terms of geography, culture, class, and economic background and meets with faculty in small seminars taught in English. An emphasis on critical thinking, intellectual ambition, creativity, and the connection between life in and outside the classroom is a fundamental feature. Qualifying students can earn both an American and a German BA degree. For more information visit: <https://www.berlin.bard.edu>

The Center for Comparative Research on Democracy (CCRD) is a research center at the Department of Social Sciences, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. The Center is dedicated to promoting a deeper and more nuanced understanding of democracy by bringing together scholars from a wide range of disciplines, including political science, sociology, philosophy, and law, to study the complex and multifaceted nature of democracy. The Center's research activities include organizing workshops and conferences, fostering international collaborations, and supporting graduate students and postdoctoral scholars. CCRD also engages policy makers and the broader public through its outreach activities, such as public lectures, book events, and roundtable discussions. It provides opportunities and platforms for scholars at risk and facilitates the exchange of ideas on academic freedom. It also creates a hub for comparative research on issues of (de-)democratization in Europe and beyond. For more information visit: <https://ccrd-berlin.de/>

The organizers would like
to thank the Andrew Gagarin Trust
whose generous support made this conference possible.

11:00 – 12:30

Panel 1: Learning with and from Institutions in Exile

Moderator: Kerry Bystrom, Bard College Berlin

- Tuba Inal Cekic, Off University
- Margee Ensign, AltLiberalArts
- Philip Fedchin, Smolny Beyond Borders/ Gagarin Center
- Oleksandr Shtokvych, Central European University

12:30 – 13:30

Lunch

13:30 – 15:00

Roundtable: Navigating Constraints of Media and Preserving Memory

Moderator: Thomas Keenan, Bard College

- Marija Ristic, Amnesty International/ Bard College Berlin
- Ilya Venyavkin, Kronika
- Joshua Yaffa, New Yorker/ Bard College Berlin

15:00 – 15:30

Coffee

15:30 – 17:00

Panel 2: Mapping Threats to Academic Freedom

Moderator: Ertuğ Tombuş, CCRD/ Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

- Dmitry Dubrovskiy, Charles University
- Aysuda Kölemen, Threatened Scholars Integration Initiative/ Bard College Berlin
- Liviu Matei, Kings College London
- Amy Reid, PEN America

17:00 – 17:30

Coffee

17:30 – 19:00

Roundtable: Contemporary Human Rights Dilemmas

Moderator: Fred Abrahams, Neier Center at Bard College Berlin

- Jennifer Gaspar, Araminta
- Mariana Katzarova, UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Russia
- Mary Lawlor, former UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders
- Ken Roth, former Executive Director Human Rights Watch

