



**Universität
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CENTRE ZÜRICH

Transformative Bildung für gesellschaftlichen Wandel

«Shrinking Spaces: The Harassment of Civil
Society in the Russian Autocracy»

Veranstaltungsbericht

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On the 7th of April 2022, the webinar series “Sustainability Now! - Transformative Education for Societal Change” dealt with an incredibly current topic, “Shrinking Spaces: The Harassment of Civil Society in the Russian Autocracy”. The Laureate honoured in this webinar session was the Russian human rights foundation Memorial, awarded with the Right Livelihood award in 2004. Memorial was, before its liquidation, the largest human rights organisation in Russia. The main focus of Memorial is the historical reappraisal of political repression as well as the social care for people who experienced violence under the Soviet regime. They also stand up for the observance of human rights in Russia which gets extremely difficult nowadays under the autocracy. In representation of Memorial, Anna Dobrovolskaya presented about the current situation in Russia, especially considering the current conflict in Ukraine.

Anna is the Executive Director of Memorial. She is currently the last woman standing at Memorial Russia of once 100 members because the organisation was forced to liquidate. With still being in Russia and for trying to stand by the promise of Memorial, not to give up and defend the observance of human rights in Russia, she shows a huge amount of courage.

In order to complement the presentation during the following discussion, we were joined by two panellists.

One of them was Dr. Sandra Frimmel who is an art historian currently at the Slavistic Institute at the University of Zurich. Her research and work oftentimes concern Russian artists and the way their expression has been restricted stronger and stronger over time. In order to gain further insight into these areas, Dr. Frimmel has done research in the archives of Memorial, through which she has become familiar with the organisation itself and the kind of work they do. Prof. Bertil Cottier is a retired Law professor from the University of Lausanne. Now, he is working with Reporters without Borders, as well as holding a seat for Switzerland on the Commission against Racism and Intolerance. His profile is made for extremely interesting insights on the topics of media governance and propaganda.

Due to its incredible relevance at the moment, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine was one of the main topics of the evening. Anna Dobrovolskaya presented the consequences for the Russian civil society under the light of war and the Russian autocracy. She also discussed how it came about that Memorial had to be liquidated and what the legal situation is for NGOs and the media in the country, and how the human rights of the Russian civil society no longer had the representation they so direly need at a time like this.

Another important topic of the evening was propaganda and free expression. There was a thought-provoking discussion regarding the importance of education, and how much of an

impact it has on one's capacity to see through propaganda in an autocracy. The restrictions upon expression were also discussed, and all three of the discussion members believe that there is the possibility for the restrictions on expression to worsen further.

The presentation as well as the following discussion were remarkably interesting and provided a valuable insight on the current situation. Although the media coverage right now is extensive, we found the discussion on this evening raised topics which don't get attention. Especially the consequences for the Russian society are not sufficiently represented. Thanks to the participants, we were able to learn about the importance of providing help when asked we can and standing up against Russiaphobia during these times of war. Furthermore, we realized that democracy is a precious space which is worth standing up for but also reflect on how the sanctions may affect the Russian Civil Society.