

Science Diplomacy in times of War – To what extent should western countries distance themselves from Russian Science?

*The response of scientists and science policymakers to the war in Ukraine has been mixed, with different actors calling for varying degrees of engagement and withdrawal from Russian Science. In this cross-post from [Frontiers Policy Labs](#), **Eric Piaget**, **Luk Van Langenhove**, and **Luc Soete** discuss how continued collaboration with Russian research is an important factor in achieving wider western foreign policy goals with Russia.*

Science diplomacy has many faces. One of them is viewing scientific collaboration as a possible tool to keep dialogue lines open between states in conflict. The rationale is that scientists speak the same “language”, which can weave cultures together and build trust, irrespective of political animosities between governments. But, as Doubravka Olšáková and Sam Robinson have [argued](#), “Science diplomacy is primarily an instrument for times of peace.” What are the options for science diplomacy in moments of crisis such as the current Russian aggression in Ukraine?

As Vladimir Putin continues his horrific war in Ukraine, the West continues its historically coordinated response: imposing [all-encompassing sanctions](#) on Russia, detaching it from the global community. This reaction is warranted in a war that is unleashing huge suffering on the Ukrainian people, destroying civilian health and education infrastructure, disregarding the rules-based international system, and nudging the world perilously close to nuclear conflict. Drastic times call for drastic measures. However, the heat of the moment may blind us to the implications of cutting *all* ties with Russia. Scientific collaboration—the essence of science diplomacy—is one area that demands careful consideration before all doors are sealed shut. To that end, this article seeks to underline a few reasons why *certain* collaborations with Russian scientists should not be counted as additional victims of the war.

Scientific collaboration—the essence of science diplomacy—is one area that demands careful consideration before all doors are sealed shut.

The word “certain” in the previous sentence is critical because there are many areas of scientific cooperation that are *not* justified in times of conflict. The West was certainly right to cut Russia off from scientific research equipment and goods of a dual-use nature that could bolster its capacity to conduct war and perform other coercive actions. However, sanctions against the Russian scientific community appear to extend much further. There have even been calls to bar Russian academics from [publishing their work in western journals](#).



While the display of western solidarity with Ukraine is laudable, it is concerning that many of the halted scientific projects and publications are focused on collaborative goals that go far beyond the scope of geopolitics. From microbiology to space exploration, thousands of collaborative endeavours with Russian scientists have no discernible connection to the war. [EURUCAS](#) and [CARE](#), projects aimed, respectively, at advancing arctic research and fighting diseases like HIV and tuberculosis, are recent examples of collaborative science geared towards problems that exist across political boundaries. The [European Virus Archive](#) is another example of Russian involvement in a global pool of knowledge directed at solving universal problems. Expelling Russian scientists from joint projects aimed at tackling borderless, apolitical problems will not change Putin's mind, nor will it help Ukraine in any meaningful way. It does, however, weaken the goal of shared solutions for shared problems.

In our view, scientific sanctions should take a more selective, case-by-case approach. For instance, it would be hard to justify maintaining openness with the Russian space agency (Roscosmos), given its political connections to the Kremlin. After Russia illegally annexed Crimea, Roscosmos [moved its cosmonaut training camp there](#). While an unfortunate victim of this war, space exploration is a very institutionalised endeavor—and Roscosmos is an institution that propagates the politics of the Kremlin to the point that cooperation with that institution is inappropriate.

If science diplomacy is the pursuit of foreign-policy objectives through science, then the open scientific channels developed over the last few decades should be cherished and kept as open as possible.

Breaking ties with all Russian scientists also overlooks the role of science diplomacy in resolving conflicts. As Olšáková and Robinson put it, maintaining certain forms of scientific cooperation with Russia throughout this war might at first seem like a naïve historical reading of science diplomacy mythologised during the Cold War, when American and Soviet scientists helped set the mood for détente by working together in fields like [space exploration](#), demographics, [vaccine development](#), and [nuclear fusion](#). Today, however, science diplomacy illustrates the global nature of science and technological progress in our highly interdependent world. Scientific progress cannot afford to be nationalistic when cross-border collaboration is needed to face global challenges. These challenges need the input of all scientists.

If science diplomacy is the pursuit of foreign-policy objectives through science, then the open scientific channels developed over the last few decades should be cherished and kept as open as possible. Such channels should be used to pursue mutual trust and understanding among scientists as an antidote for, as Sergey Guriev and Daniel Treisman put it, the new generation of “[spin dictators](#)”, like Vladimir Putin, who will use information to control citizens. “Like spin doctors in democracies, they spin the news to engineer support.” Scientists will rarely fall for such distorted information. Cutting ties is the wrong policy: it leaves scientists in the cold, at the mercy of a regime that is bent on crushing the freedom of inquiry that underpins their work.

For these reasons, cooperation should continue as much as possible, as long as it does not jeopardize the safety of Russian scientists or assist the Kremlin’s objectives. This sentiment has been echoed by many voices in the western academic community, as seen in [a letter](#) from US and Canadian researchers, urging their governments to resist “shunning all Russian scientists for the actions of the Russian government”. Cutting Russian researchers out of the global science community because they reside in a country ruled by a despicable dictator disregards the Enlightenment principals of progress and toleration upon which western societies are based.

This commentary was originally published in [Frontiers Policy Labs](#), an initiative that seeks to strengthen the connection between robust scientific research and informed policymaking

The content generated on this blog is for information purposes only. This Article gives the views and opinions of the authors and does not reflect the views and opinions of the Impact of Social Science blog (the blog), nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

Image Credit: [Nasa](#) via Unsplash.
