

# **Evaluation of the Center for Eastern European and International Studies (ZOiS)**

## **Evaluation Report**

### **Part A: Self-Presentation of ZOiS**

### **Part B: Report of the Commission**

The recommendations contained in this document were developed by the Commission for the Evaluation of the Center for Eastern European and International Studies (ZOiS), chaired by Professor Dr. Eduard Mühle, Münster, and handed over to the Foundation Board in February 2023.

**PRELIMINARY REMARKS: MANDATE AND WORKING METHODS**

In March of 2022 the ZOiS Foundation Board tasked a special commission with evaluating the Center for Eastern European and International Studies (ZOiS). This report is the outcome of that evaluation work.

The Commission consisted of the following members:

- Professor Dr. Eduard **Mühle**, University of Münster (Chairman)
- Professor Dr. Grzegorz **Ekiert**, Harvard University
- Professor Dr. Markku **Kivinen**, University of Helsinki
- Professor Dr. Tetyana **Malyarenko**, National University “Odesa Law Academy”
- Dr. Andreas **Schlüter**, formerly Secretary General of the Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft
- Professor Dr. Anja **Tippner**, University of Hamburg
- Ms. Ricarda **Ziegler**, Wissenschaft im Dialog gGmbH

Dr. Harald **Rosenbach**, Managing Director of the Max Weber Foundation – German Humanities Institutes Abroad, and Ms. Nele **Quecke**, Officer in the Planning Staff of the Federal Foreign Office, participated in the Commission’s deliberations as guests.

Dr. Jochen **Holzkamp**, Hamburg, was entrusted with preparing for, supporting, and compiling the evaluation work.

At the request of the Foundation Board, the evaluation encompassed all of ZOiS’s diverse activities. In addition to conducting research and disseminating the findings thereof, core activities of the institute include promoting young researchers and providing for the networking of academics. It was decided that the evaluation would cover all of these activities. Furthermore, the evaluation took into account issues related to research management (e.g. ethical questions in research, research data management, open access, good scientific practice) as well as the governance structure of the institute.

In accordance with this mandate, the work of the Commission consisted of:

- a written survey of ZOiS (i.e. the answering of a questionnaire and submission of data based on the procedure used by the Max Weber Foundation's Humanities Institutes Abroad,<sup>1</sup> which was adapted to ZOiS),
- On-site meetings in Berlin with representatives of the institute management, the funding body, the German Federal Foreign Office, the Academic Advisory Board, the Foundation's Board of Trustees, as well as with selected visiting researchers and cooperation partners. Likewise, the Commission held various discussions with ZOiS staff, including a presentation of completed and ongoing projects (9 and 10 November 2022),
- the subsequent preparation of an evaluation report, including Commission deliberations to determine its contents (November 2022 to February 2023).

The Commission draws explicit attention to the fact that ZOiS is still a young research institution. Accordingly, the evaluation has focused primarily on structural issues - from the point of functionality and from the point of view of personnel -, and makes only cursory assessments of performance. In the future, ZOiS should be externally evaluated at regular intervals – approximately every five to seven years, in the view of the Commission.

The Commission expressly thanks the employees of ZOiS for their open and constructive cooperation during the evaluation process.

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<sup>1</sup> For the Max Weber Foundation's quality assurance procedures, see [www.maxweberstiftung.de](http://www.maxweberstiftung.de).

## **Part A: Self-Presentation of ZOIS**

## **Part B: Report of the Commission**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>B. EVALUATION .....</b>	<b>3</b>
B.1 Overall concept and profile.....	3
B.2 Research.....	5
B.2.1 Development of past years and strategic work planning .....	5
B.2.2 Research clusters.....	7
B.2.3 Participation in university teaching and the promotion of young academics...	11
B.3 Research Communication .....	12
B.4 Organization and Equipment .....	14
B.4.1 Organization .....	14
B.4.2 Personnel.....	19
B.4.3 Offices and library .....	22
B.4.4 Finances.....	23

## B. EVALUATION

Within a few years, the Center for Eastern European and International Studies (ZOiS) has established a clearly visible and innovative research profile; has carried out important work to communicate its research findings; and has pursued significant research projects, especially on Ukraine and the post-Soviet space, while cooperating with national and international partners. ZOiS has become an integral part of the German research landscape on Eastern Europe with a compelling profile that has wisely and meaningfully complemented existing expertise in Germany. It has thus filled a gap in the research landscape, especially in terms of policy-relevant and social-scientific research concerned with the former Soviet Union, including Central Asia. At the same time, the institute has been consistently focused on conducting basic research. In this way, ZOiS is not a think tank, but rather a unique research institute. It performs important policy advising work while also carrying out valuable activities in the area of research communication. It has also become a home base for up-and-coming young researchers, and has established lasting links with academics in its region of study. At ZOiS, various multi- and interdisciplinary perspectives are successfully integrated, thus allowing a wide range of relevant questions to be addressed in an original way. For example, ZOiS scholars are currently providing valued background information and analysis with regard to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and they are very present in the public debate with their expertise.

With regard to the further positive development of ZOiS, the Commission offers various recommendations, which are detailed in the following.

### B.1 Overall concept and profile

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine underlines the importance and urgency of current and serious research on Eastern Europe, and makes abundantly clear the need for a discrete focus on the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The Commission sees a great need for the ongoing and systematic analysis of the complex changes underway in these regions. The Commission therefore expressly welcomes the establishment of ZOiS, which was founded in 2016 as an organization dedicated to contemporary research on Eastern Europe, with the aim of shedding light on the social, economic, and political processes taking place in the region, while also providing background information on current developments.

In the few years since its foundation, ZOiS has already become an established institution for social science research on Eastern Europe, and is well known for its communication of its research findings to policymakers, the media, and the general public. Thus, within a comparatively short period of time, ZOiS has succeeded in becoming a visible, widely recognized actor with a strong scholarly reputation in the German and international

debate on Eastern Europe. Overall, it makes an important and widely recognized contribution to research on the social, economic, and political conditions and developments in these countries, and, in this respect, pursues salient questions of interest with regard to Eastern Europe that have only been addressed sporadically to date in university and non-university settings in Germany.

In terms of its mission and working methods, ZOiS focuses on the empirical social sciences, thus offering a rather unique perspective in German research on Eastern Europe. Its empirical analysis is often problem-oriented (and thus falls under the rubric of “problem-oriented basic social science research”), what differentiates ZOiS from most of the other academic institutions working in the field. ZOiS’s research findings have a very high level of social relevance. In this connection, reference must be made to the long-term nature of various field investigations, as well as the sociological analysis that is based on surveys and specially commissioned opinion polls. This work has provided ZOiS researchers with special insights into the societies in question. In this way, ZOiS fulfills an important “complementary function,” filling a gap between think tanks that are engaged in policy advising on current issues, and the more humanities-oriented and historically oriented institutes at universities, whose activities are often more removed from the policy domain.

In accordance with its self-conception, ZOiS pursues diverse forms of networking. Networking activities are defined as a discrete goal in the institute's charter. Thanks to its selection of socially and politically relevant topics in basic research, dedicated efforts to disseminate associated research findings, and work to support the careers of young researchers, ZOiS functions as a national and increasingly international point of contact for networking and exchange between universities, research institutes, think tanks, foundations, funding organizations, and other entities with a connection to Eastern Europe. ZOiS has developed a considerable network of personal and institutional ties to university and non-university cooperative partners in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. Naturally, not all collaborative ties have been equally valuable for research. The Commission strongly supports ZOiS in its objective to re-evaluate its national and international networks and focus in successive steps on strategically important partners. Existing international ties offer an excellent foundation for ZOiS to achieve its goal of becoming an “international hub” for research on Eastern Europe.

As a new non-university institute, ZOiS has placed a systematic focus on research communication from the very beginning, as foreseen by the institute’s charter. ZOiS has been very successful in not only conducting research but also subsequently disseminating its research findings. The experience and knowledge that have been developed in the domains of research and research communication have been interrelated in a mutually enriching fashion. The institute’s appealing and artfully presented publication formats are valued by both policymakers and the lay public. In



this respect, ZOiS certainly serves as a role model – an achievement all the more notable when one considers that ZOiS is still a fairly young institute.

Despite its strong growth, ZOiS remains a small organization. The fact that the institute's multifarious activities are nevertheless perceived as being of high quality is due to the great professional competence and above-average commitment of its employees, their palpable enthusiasm for their work in research, communication, and administration, and their pronounced identification with the institute's goals. However, so far there is far too few permanent positions (see B.4.2). The career structure for most of the people has to be tailored in a systematic way, taking into account the unique position of ZOiS between the think tanks and academic community.

After an extremely successful start-up phase, ZOiS must now build on its good performance to date by streamlining and consolidating its activities. The institute has grown rapidly – not only in terms of staff, research topics, and projects (including externally funded projects), but also in terms of its visibility in academia and in political and public discourse. In addition, actors in the domains of politics and academia continue to attach very high expectations to the institute's work. After an intensive start-up phase, the institute is now in a transition phase in which it must consolidate its research activities. While currently riding on a wave of success, the institute should nevertheless undertake critical self-reflection and pursue its further development following a SWOT analysis of relevant strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. This is advisable not least in order to prevent rising workloads from causing the institute to “overheat.”

## B.2 Research

### B.2.1 Development of past years and strategic work planning

#### *Research Program*

ZOiS's research program provides extensive leeway when it comes to the conception of research clusters and development of research topics. The funding body expressly supports the extensive independence that ZOiS enjoys when designing its research program. Furthermore, the institute leverages this independence in a compelling fashion. The overarching topics and individual projects that are pursued within the research clusters are selected, on the one hand, based on problems that play an important role in the domain of policy advising and, on the other hand, based on current issues and debates from area studies and the social sciences. In this regard, the institute has adopted various suggestions provided by research staff, the Academic Advisory Board, the Foundation Board, and actors from policy institutes. These suggestions have been successfully translated into ongoing research projects. The heads of the research

clusters have a great deal of freedom in how they define and address research topics. However, the current bottom-up approach for selecting and defining research topics has led on occasion to activities developing “their own momentum” in a given direction. In other cases, the topic selection process would appear to be somewhat arbitrary. Accordingly, the process by which topics are selected over the medium and long term still has room for improvement overall.

While the topic spectrum is coherent, it is also exceedingly broad, which is problematic given the small size of the institute and limited research staff (some 50 research projects are being worked on at present). The research topics should be further consolidated and a focus should be placed on guiding questions in each respective subfield. It is additionally recommended that a review be conducted of the current approach by which research work is organized into individual, rather short-term projects with multiple points of overlap. Consideration should be given instead to bundling research activities into projects with a longer-term duration. The development of the clusters needs clarifying the rules concerning the generation, establishment and possible ending of clusters. For this the career structures within the institute have to be specified as well.

#### *Research topics*

ZOiS structures its research according to empirical social dynamics in Eastern Europe, thus organizing research based on overarching dichotomies such as stability vs. change, conflict and cooperation, and (re)integration vs. disintegration. This thematic orientation allows socio-political problems to be addressed in a comparative manner while also considering transregional and transnational aspects. This comparative approach should be further developed by ZOiS.

ZOiS is one of the few institutes that deals with current issues and, in equal measure, with long-term, background themes related to the entire area of Eastern Europe. Especially against the backdrop of the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, which was a violation of international law, ZOiS has provided important insights, not only with regard to the situation in Ukraine, but also in Russia. However, ZOiS’s research portfolio addresses a number of additional important topics. One particularly noteworthy area of research concerns youth in Eastern Europe. This work has shed valuable light on social developments in the countries in question. ZOiS has also provided important analyses and informational material on developments in Belarus since the 2020 presidential elections.

In addition, ZOiS’s work on the countries of Central Asia, which otherwise receive relatively little public attention, deserves special mention. ZOiS’s continuous work on the region is therefore of great importance, especially for the region’s public visibility in Germany.

As particularly important research topics, the Commission wishes to highlight the collection of empirical social scientific data in Ukraine since 2016; an interdisciplinary study on mass protests in Belarus; a data collection project on youth attitudes in Russia, Belarus, and Poland; the cross-regional and cross-methodological MOBILISE project on Exit & Voice (Poland, Ukraine, Argentina, Morocco); research on DCFTAs (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas) in Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine; and field research on infrastructure projects along the New Silk Road (Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI). Studies on the role of the Russian–Ukrainian Orthodox Church as well as research on authoritarianism and memory from the perspective of literary and cultural studies have also garnered considerable attention.

The Commission believes that ZOiS should focus more intensively on other countries of East Central Europe, such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and on associated political and social developments. Topics that have yet to be addressed include Russia’s system of rule, its elites, and security and military policy issues (e.g. civil–military relations, or the development of the armed forces of Eastern Europe states).

Moving forward, ZOiS should carefully consider to what extent cooperation with partners who study complementary disciplines and topics could be intensified. In particular, cooperation with partners in the fields of literary studies, cultural studies, media studies, and law should be considered. Without weakening ZOiS’s focus on empirical social science, such cooperation could improve the ability of the institute to identify relevant problems, developments, and issues outside of its existing expertise.

### *Interdisciplinarity*

Overall, ZOiS approaches its research in a multi- and interdisciplinary manner; a wide range of social science disciplines are represented at the institute. The institute draws primarily on the theories, approaches, and methods of political science, sociology, social anthropology, geography, and political economy. In addition, ZOiS employs staff from the domains of cultural studies and theology. ZOiS’s chosen interdisciplinary orientation is appropriate to its area of work, and is also necessary for the proper analysis of the multifarious developments taking place in Eastern Europe. ZOiS’s joint publications by researchers from different disciplines are also notable. Such publications represent an effective strategy to overcome disciplinary boundaries and increase the visibility of ZOiS projects across disciplines.

## B.2.2 Research clusters

### *Organization of research clusters*

The organization of the institute’s activities into research clusters that are dedicated to specific themes is a suitable approach for fulfilling the institute’s mandate. It also fulfills

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an important integrative function. By selecting this method of organization, ZOiS has deliberately adopted a structure that is more open than organization by department. These research clusters enable the involvement of researchers from various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. At the same time, the research clusters have been defined in a manner that provides ZOiS researchers with sufficient leeway to integrate new topics or develop their own research projects. The research clusters must be updated at certain intervals. There is a need for a balance between predictability and renewal in the development of the clusters.

In the Commission's view, individual research clusters appear in part to have developed independent priorities. Given this organizational structure, the Commission believes that special attention must be paid to the publication recommendations with regard to area studies versus disciplinary journals and to how the research clusters collaborate with each other, and how their activities are coordinated in terms of topical concerns. For the purpose of implementing this collaboration and coordination, the institute's cross-cutting themes, which are designed to interlink the research clusters, appear particularly suitable. Nevertheless, ZOiS still lacks a concrete vision concerning how overarching research concerns can be structured, coordinated, and managed.

While, from ZOiS's perspective, the individual research clusters are complementary to each other, there is also divergence between them in terms of the duration of their existence, the number of projects being pursued, and the research staff assigned to them. Some research clusters have just a few employees – too few to fulfill ZOiS's goal of conducting multi/interdisciplinary research. The Commission recommends that ZOiS re-examine the design of the research clusters from the perspective of theory and research practice, and consider reducing their number.

#### *Individual research clusters*

In the following, the Commission provides a summary of the activities of each research cluster:<sup>1</sup>

#### **Societies between Stability and Change**

This research cluster conducts empirical investigations of transformation processes in post-Soviet countries. Of the five research clusters, this cluster is the largest organizationally, but at the same time, it is also the most heterogeneous. The research is innovative, comparative, and interdisciplinary. Topically, the research cluster examines the most pressing issues facing the region's countries, as well as their foreign and security policies. The specific topics and research questions addressed are

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<sup>1</sup> The Commission only evaluates the performance of each cluster in a cursory manner. The evaluation focuses on structural issues (see preliminary remarks)

nevertheless quite general. The individual projects share a common focus and interest in forms of social communication, historical memory, and present-day relevance. Some research projects conducted within this research cluster have more long-term goals, as they aim to explore trends and trajectories in the development of post-Soviet countries, while other projects (e.g. the panel survey in Belarus during and after the 2020–21 mobilization) address current issues of particular interest to Germany and its relations to neighboring European countries. The research cluster includes twelve internally and two externally funded projects, the results of which are highly visible in the international academic and policy communities, as well as to the broader public. Despite this heterogeneity, the research cluster produces valuable synergies, as evidenced by large and often collaborative research output.

### **Conflict Dynamics and Border Regions**

The research cluster addresses important issues of decolonization and recolonization that are only addressed tangentially by the other research clusters. The research cluster is still quite small, but has great prospects for growth, as indicated by the fact that five externally funded projects are being conducted on the topic of conflict management. Although the research cluster was originally devoted to the topic of border regions, moving forward, the cluster clearly has the potential to address important topic areas in the domain of conflict management. However, geographically, the cluster is primarily focused on researching the conflict in Ukraine (two projects are concerned with Ukraine in relation to Moldova, and a third project, which began in 2022, has a broader geographic focus). In the view of the Commission, this research cluster should seek to examine current and potential conflicts also in other countries of Eastern Europe – for example, in Georgia, or in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh. This research cluster also gives insufficient attention to the study of Russia, including its military and political strategy, and its involvement in war. The projects and researchers in this cluster are interwoven in a compelling manner with activities in the research cluster of Political Economy and Integration. The work of the cluster also shows promising links to the theory of liminality. As this is the newest cluster, its projects are still insufficiently “bundled.” Nevertheless, the cluster is an important part of ZOiS’s overall research organization, and it fills a gap in German research on Eastern Europe.

### **Migration and Diversity**

This research cluster focuses on issues of migration, diaspora, and belonging in diverse places such as Central Asia, Georgia, and Berlin. The cluster brings together a number of individual and comparative case-study projects, all of which are of considerable relevance to both academia and policy in Germany. The geographic, methodological, and disciplinary scope of the subproject demonstrates added value in that it addresses research questions from various methodological and theoretical perspectives, e.g. from anthropology, digital humanities, and media studies. The cluster’s projects examine

both the reasons for emigration and the processes associated with receiving migrants in host countries, including Germany. A broad spectrum of migrant groups is covered: from educational migrants coming to Germany from Georgia and Ukraine to refugees from war-torn areas. One of the merits of this project is the combination of Eastern European regional studies and the methods of anthropology, as well as its geographical scope and inclusion of the Caucasus and Central Asia. The research cluster combines both qualitative and quantitative methods, which contributes to the high quality of its research output. Nevertheless, there is a certain discrepancy between the sometimes very abstract research questions and the concrete research projects. Using “migration processes” and “mobility” as key concepts could help to narrow down the wide-ranging scope of research.

### **Youth in Eastern Europe**

This research cluster studies youths as a special political actor in post-Soviet countries and EU member states. Thematically, the cluster covers a wide range of policy directed at youths (education, social insurance) as well as youth responses to contemporary challenges (behavior, attitudes, identity, ideology). Methodologically, the cluster promotes the use of surveys, interviews, and discourse and textual analysis in each project, which contributes significantly to our understanding of public youth policy and the associated sharing of research findings. The cluster’s second project on literary representation adds the necessary interdisciplinarity and aligns well with the cluster’s overarching concerns. The acquisition of the ERC grant gives the project visibility while also expanding ZOiS’s research network.

The research cluster could benefit from the classic cultural resistance studies of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies (including Paul Willis and Dick Hebdige on subcultures and youth styles). The cluster could also be supplemented with qualitative social research. In addition to its existing focus on the sociology of values and attitudes, the cluster’s work could be usefully expanded with consideration of cultural and semiotic structures.

### **Political Economy and Integration**

The research cluster “Political Economy and Integration” studies problems related to the integration of Eastern European countries into the European Union, and the challenges they face in the global economy. The cluster’s focus on economics provides much-needed expertise in a subfield that has long been neglected in area studies. The combination of economics and Eastern European studies enables scholars in this cluster to address important issues of market formation and integration, as pursued by key actors such as the EU, Russia, and China.

This research cluster consists of four projects, two of which are externally funded. The research project on “China, the EU, and Economic Integration in Eastern Europe and

Eurasia” is particularly noteworthy, as it focuses on analyzing how the implementation of China’s BRI project in Eastern European countries has changed since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The project has a great relevance and importance for policy makers in Germany, as it points to potentials for correcting Germany’s economic strategy of cooperation and trade with China. The project is a good example of how ZOiS has succeeded in building up expertise on China that cannot yet be directly assigned to a research cluster.

The research projects within the cluster are interdisciplinary, as they combine theoretical and methodological approaches from political science, international relations, and economics. In the view of the Commission, the research methods used (interviews, focus group discussions, surveys) should be supplemented with economic analysis and statistics.

#### *Research and Publication Performance*

The researchers take into account current theoretical, methodological, and thematic discussions in the disciplines relevant to them in their research clusters. The research is of a high standard in its leveraging of social scientific methods and models. The research is also marked by exemplary intellectual curiosity and creativity.

ZOiS’s compelling research program and publication activities both testify to the high quality of the institute’s work. Overall, ZOiS is marked by energetic publication activities, with staff members publishing monographs as well as numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals. While the quality of the publications varies depending on the area of work, they are generally very good to excellent. Most of the research clusters are very productive, as evidenced by the publication activity, although some of the individual projects are not particularly visible to the academic community and the broader public. In addition, by making its publications available online, ZOiS is pursuing a compelling strategy for the sharing of research findings with the broader public, as testified by monthly visitation statistics at the website.

#### **B.2.3 Participation in university teaching and the promotion of young academics**

Scientists at ZOiS participate in university teaching with a laudable degree of commitment. At present, however, university teaching is largely performed due to personal inclination and interest, and is essentially based on individual contacts and arrangements. The Commission views it as a goal for ZOiS to develop institutional ties based on agreements with universities, primarily in the Berlin-Brandenburg area, that will enable young researchers to gain teaching experience.

As a non-university institute, ZOiS relies on close cooperation with universities for academic qualification. For the career advancement of young researchers, ZOiS has concluded numerous cooperation agreements with Berlin universities as well as with

national and international universities, which enables the academic supervision of their thesis work. These agreements also provide the heads of the research clusters with the right to be involved in matters related to doctoral work (supervision, assessment, examination). Collaboration with the Berlin Graduate School of Social Sciences (BGSS) provides a good cooperative platform for the qualification of doctoral students. The involvement of doctoral students in externally funded projects is well established at ZOiS. Doctoral students also have the opportunity to participate in joint research colloquia (in cooperation with the FU Berlin, HU Berlin, and the European University Viadrina Frankfurt/Oder), and in different forms of research communication, including the ZOiS Spotlight and ZOiS Report. Except on doctoral students, special attention must be paid to the post-doc career prospects. ZOiS has so far fulfilled its statutory mandate of advancing the careers of young researchers, given the current possibilities at the institute. In the future, ZOiS should continue to heavily involve young academics in its research work.

The fact that ZOiS is interesting even for advanced students is demonstrated by the numerous student employees at ZOiS as well as the diverse student internships, which are made possible, among other things, by cooperations with the Higher School of Economics in Moscow<sup>2</sup> and with Harvard University.

### B.3 Research Communication

ZOiS communicates the results of its research to a professional audience and to the broader public by engaging in an impressively wide range of activities. Considering the small number of employees dedicated to such tasks, the scope of the institute's engagement in this area deserves great recognition.

In the Commission's view, ZOiS's research communications, which take various forms, are of high quality. They respond to current political, economic, and social developments while offering a thematic breadth and high level of comprehensibility that comparable offerings do not have. An additional mark quality is ZOiS's tailoring of its communications to target audiences. Thanks to its various communication formats, ZOiS succeeds not only in reaching individuals with professional or academic expertise in a given topic area, but also those who have so far only dealt with a given topic in passing and now want to delve deeper. Formats such as "Expert\*innenstimme" [Expert Voices] are suitable for a quick introduction to a topic, while the "Spotlight," "Roundtable Eastern Europe," and "Central Asia Analyses" are appropriate for investigating a topic in more detail. The media presence of ZOiS and its research has a strong personal

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<sup>2</sup> ZOiS has suspended this cooperation.



component, as it is linked to its Director. Efforts should be made to encourage greater media attention for other ZOiS staff members.

After a period of successful development and expansion, ZOiS is faced the task of consolidating its activities in the domain of research communication. In this regard, the Commission makes the following recommendations and suggestions:

- \_ Communication should be more strategically planned with first identifying ZOiS' communication goals and objectives and formats being chosen and activities being designed accordingly. This should be accompanied by a monitoring process established in order to evaluate the existing activities and formats in terms of their actual impact, target audiences, and reach. Formats that have not proven successful should be modified or potentially discontinued.
- \_ The target audience of policymakers should be expanded by making communications more targeted to this readership. Political decision makers should also be addressed in a more direct fashion. In this connection, ZOiS should seek to offer policy recommendations.
- \_ Having focused its media work on a national level in its founding phase, ZOiS should strive for more international media attention in the future.
- \_ In its mission statement, ZOiS sets forth its principles in the domain of research communication, confirming the independence of its activities in this area. The mission statement should be expanded to include commitments regarding the handling of sensitive topics and data (e.g. ZOiS as in independent research institute receiving funding from the government).
- \_ In the view of the Commission, ZOiS should monitor societal debates and identify at an early stage whether a research topic examined at ZOiS has the potential to become a "public issue," for the purpose of engaging in proactive communications.
- \_ ZOiS should explore to what extent its research communication activities can make use of influencers and multipliers.
- \_ The Academic Advisory Board and Foundation Board should be composed such that the domain of research communication is represented.
- \_ ZOiS considers the domain of research communication to be "constitutive" (meaning the associated organizational unit is structurally fundamental to the institute). Accordingly, the head of research communication should receive compensation that is comparable to that of the heads of the research clusters. Furthermore, the head of research communication should be included in the Expanded Deliberate Body (see below) for the institute's management. This could also help in ensuring that researchers at ZOiS also in the future value the institute's and their personal role in public communications and work on their professional communication skills (e.g. by

regularly reflecting their communication engagement with communication staff or by taking part in communication trainings by external providers).

\_The head of research communication should have academic experience (i.e. a PhD) – as is true of the current head – in order to fulfill the important bridging function between communication and research. Among other things, this will allow feedback received regarding research communication to directly inform future research activities.

\_As ZOiS seeks to hire new researchers, it should draw explicit attention to the close relationship between research and its subsequent dissemination at the institute. When evaluating applications, candidates should be considered in part with a view to how they can support this mandate.

\_Evaluations – for example, of tenure track candidates – should also take into account the individual’s contributions to research communication.

\_ZOiS should also seek to become involved in research communication networks.

The staff who are active in research communication seek to fulfill a standard of professionalism that far exceeds that of traditional public relations work. They perform their duties with a high level of professional expertise and extraordinary commitment.

The Commission particularly welcomes the fact that ZOiS hosted a visiting journalist in 2019 and is currently offering a journalist-in-residence program together with the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB) for journalists from Ukraine. ZOiS should create additional opportunities for visiting journalists to perform residencies.

## B.4 Organization and Equipment

### B.4.1 Organization

#### *Governance – Academic Independence of ZOiS*

The current governance structure was determined by the desire to ensure ZOiS’s academic independence. To this end, ZOiS was founded as an institute with the legal form of a gGmbH (non-profit limited-liability company), which is operated by a foundation of the same name, which assumes the function of shareholder. From the point of view of the Commission, the ZOiS’s academic independence is guaranteed in a fundamental way by the chosen foundation structure. The foundation’s charter makes an explicit commitment to freedom in research and other academic pursuits.

There may on occasion be a tendency for government officials to contend the presence of “supervisional deficits” when it comes to appraising the work of non-university research institutions that are unattached to departments of government, as the

conception of research held by individuals concerned with government policy may be conditioned by their departmental interests, and thus diverge from that of academic researchers. The Commission notes that such a tendency is observable when it comes to the relationship between the Federal Foreign Office and ZOiS. Accordingly, the Commission once again emphasizes the fundamental importance of ensuring ZOiS's academic independence on a structural level. ZOiS must retain sufficient freedom of action, not only when it comes to the selection of research topics, but also in the presentation of its research findings. A high degree of academic autonomy is regarded by the Commission as an indispensable prerequisite for the fulfillment of ZOiS's mandate so that it can make an important contribution to fact-based socio-political debates concerned with Eastern Europe. Academic independence is of fundamental importance to ZOiS's reputation in government, public administration, academia, and civil society.

#### *Governance – Composition of the Foundation Board*

The composition of the Foundation Board is such that the funding body is not in a position by itself to outvote the up to three academic members of the Foundation Board in decisions concerning the institute's research. However, the funding body can create a majority to outvote these academic members when it aligns itself with the remaining three political representatives on the Foundation Board (such that there is a united front consisting of the representative from the Federal Foreign Office [the funding body], the representative from the Federal Chancellery, and the two representatives from the German Bundestag). This situation applies in particular to research planning, which is prepared by the Institute Management and must be submitted to the Foundation Board for approval. Thus, the scientific independence of ZOiS is currently dependent on the goodwill of the political representatives on the Foundation Board. In the Commission's view, it is not necessary for government officials to exert a direct political influence over the institute by means of a right to make staffing decisions. As the funding body, the Federal Foreign Office has already has sufficient opportunities to highlight its priorities and draw attention to how its responsibilities should impact the institute's mandate. In the Commission's view the composition of the Foundation Board should be changed so that academic members form the majority.

In order to strengthen the independence of the institute's research program, the Commission believes discussion should take place concerning the further development of the composition of the Foundation Board. In addition to strengthening the Foundation Board's academic representation, the Commission believes the representation of other social groups should be considered. Many comparable organizations do not limit the composition of their supervisory bodies to the domains of politics and academia, but also include other social segments (such as business and civil society). If the Foundation Board were to be expanded in this manner, this would augment the discursive scope of the deliberations, extending it to additional social issues.

The Commission would also welcome the appointment of an academic member of the Foundation Board to the position of chairperson, rather than the selection of a chairperson from amongst all members, as is currently the case. In the Commission's view, a regulated election procedure for the academic members without the participation of the four "political" representatives should also be found. These political representatives should be prevented from exerting a direct influence on ZOiS's work by means of their appointment of Foundation Board members.

#### *Governance – Financial Security of the Foundation*

Another problem inherent in the current organizational structure is the unresolved financing of the foundation's operations. The foundation has only a small capital endowment. The income from this capital is not sufficient to fulfill the (rudimentary) functions of the foundation. In addition to the costs of general administration, these include in particular expenses incurred by the members who compose the foundation's governing bodies (travel and hospitality expenses; insurance to cover possible liability risks). The funding body is responsible for ensuring the function of ZOiS's legal entities. However, this is not assured by the current arrangements. At the same time, the foundation cannot be expected to remedy this deficit through its own fundraising activities.

#### *Governance – Position of the Foundation Board*

The Foundation Board is the supreme body of the Foundation. Its members serve on a voluntary basis. According to the foundation charter, their legal responsibility towards the foundation is limited to cases of intent and gross negligence. This limitation of liability only applies to damages suffered by the foundation, but not to behavior that leads to damages suffered by third parties. Even if only a few cases are conceivable in which a foundation member could cause third parties to lodge damage claims, in order to protect the members of the Foundation Board (or, exclusively, the Chairperson of the Foundation Board), relief from liability risks could be achieved by taking out a corresponding insurance policy. The cost of such insurance would have to be covered by the foundation's funds.

No remuneration is provided for the members of the Foundation's bodies; they serve exclusively on a voluntary basis. This corresponds with standard practice for academic institutions. Nevertheless, it is not unusual for the chairperson of a Foundation Board to receive monetary payment as compensation for his or her considerable time commitment. However, such compensation is not provided for under the foundation's charter, and cannot be financed from the foundation's funds.

#### *Governance – Reforming Existing Structures*

The current governance structure of ZOiS is marked by a problematic duplication of roles. In addition to the management of the gGmbH (the Institute Management), the foundation itself has a management body (the Foundation Board). The Institute Management and Foundation Board must coordinate with each other. For this arrangement to function properly, mutual goodwill and trusting cooperation are essential. Nevertheless, one should strive to subdivide responsibilities between the Institute Management and Foundation Board such that conflicts are avoided and responsibilities do not overlap. The existing statutes (the charter of the gGmbH and the charter of the foundation) have been designed to be complementary, to ensure smooth cooperation and the viable distribution of responsibilities. The responsibilities are clearly described and allow for a clear delineation of the tasks incumbent on both sides. There is no overlap in competencies or responsibilities. As there are no plans at present to integrate ZOiS into another scientific or research institute or subsume it under another organization, the Commission believes it would be sensible to subdivide operational and supervisory tasks between two legal entities. However, task assignment and workflows could also be simplified if operational functions and supervisory tasks were concentrated into one organization. The Commission is therefore in favor of a governance overhaul, including an open discussion concerning organizational structures and associated funding flows. Proven governance models used by non-university research institutions can serve as a guidepost in this regard. It is encouraging that the funding body has been extremely open in discussions with the Commission on this governance issue. This is a very good prerequisite for structural reform. The Commission suggests obtaining external support for ZOiS's structural reform.

#### *Institute Management*

The current Institute Management is extremely dedicated and professional and has performed with extraordinary success in the start-up phase to date. Work within the managerial team is cooperative and characterized by mutual trust and understanding. Furthermore, the Institute Management is united in its pursuit of ZOiS's goals. The Institute Management has an integrative effect on ZOiS internally. It also fulfills the role of representing ZOiS to the outside world in a compelling fashion.

#### *Expanded Deliberative Body*

ZOiS should consider expanding its existing managerial arrangements in order to enhance discussion concerning the orientation, formulation, and development of its research program. The establishment of an Expanded Deliberative Body (that consists of the Institute Management as well as additional staff members) could help the directors of the institute with developing and implementing research and staffing strategies. In addition to the Institute Management, this Expanded Deliberative Body should consist of the heads of the research clusters and the head of research communication.

### *Academic Advisory Board*

The Academic Advisory Board advises the Foundation Board and the institute on research planning, cooperative research undertakings, and the presentation of research findings. Composed of renowned scholars from Germany and abroad, it fulfills its mandate in a persuasive fashion. Its intensive involvement in long-term research planning is viewed as an important instrument of quality assurance. In the institute's charter, the Academic Advisory Board is mandated with undertaking performance evaluations of the institute's work. However, this responsibility has "taken a back seat" in the institute's initial growth phase. The Academic Advisory Board should evaluate the performance of ZOiS and its individual research clusters on a regular basis (for example, through regular project presentations at Academic Advisory Board meetings), and also make corresponding reports to the Institute Management and Foundation Board.

### *Fellowship Program*

From the beginning, ZOiS has been an interesting academic venue for visiting scholars. Building on its past experience with visiting researchers, ZOiS intends to establish a formal Fellowship Program that will allow it to invite and integrate fellows into its research activities. This measure promises to promote the further development of the institute's research clusters, in part by furnishing new opportunities for interdisciplinary research. ZOiS also intends to preserve its ties to departing fellows by means of an alumni network.

The Commission strongly supports ZOiS's plans for a Fellowship Program. In the Commission's view, a Fellowship Program would be comparatively easy to implement and the fellowships awarded would require comparatively few financial resources. Nevertheless, the program could have a major impact on the institute's efforts to internationally network researchers who study Eastern Europe, while also promoting the dissemination of research findings in the domains of academia, culture, and civil society. The targeted invitation of fellows would also be a good way to pursue the various goals set forth in the institute's charter. The fellows should be integrated into the research activities of ZOiS in a mutually beneficial way. Various measures should be undertaken to ensure their rapid integration at the institute. All fellowships should also be publicly advertised and candidates should be selected according to transparent criteria, while also involving external researchers (such as ZOiS's Academic Advisory Board). Over the medium term, various supplementary measures could be undertaken as part of the Fellowship Program, including the acquisition of Senior Fellows, the retention of former fellows as Affiliate Scholars, and the establishment of an Alumni Program, which would help to cement ties with former fellows and retain their expertise for research activities.

The Commission sees a Fellowship Program as a "constitutive" element of ZOiS. As five years have now elapsed since the founding of ZOiS, the Commission believes that the

time is right to establish a Fellowship Program that would systematically expand the institute's already excellent international networking with partner institutions. As the Fellowship Program would represent a permanent new area of activity, the institute budget should make dedicated annual funding allocations. In addition, ZOiS should also seek to obtain external (partial or full) funding for fellows (e.g. from foundations).

#### B.4.2 Personnel

##### *ZOiS Staff*

ZOiS is home to very highly motivated and qualified employees. Despite the high linguistic and professional requirements placed on applicants and the correspondingly small circle of those who are even considered for a research position at ZOiS, ZOiS has so far succeeded in recruiting outstandingly qualified personnel.

The period since the founding of ZOiS has been characterized by a steady increase in personnel; as of 2021, five years after the institute's founding, ZOiS had 42 employees, including 32 researchers (when one counts both budget-funded and third-party-funded personnel). In view of the broad spectrum of activities pursued by the institute, this is nevertheless a "lean" headcount, and the number of staff employed should definitely not fall lower than this.

The Commission does not currently see a need for additional institutional positions for research staff, assuming that the range of activities remains unchanged. However, given the possible expansion of research concerns or additional activities, the Commission believes it would be desirable in the medium term to provide the research clusters with three staff members each (one head and two research staff members) from the institutional funding (or to distribute this staff count among a smaller number of research clusters; see section B.2.2).

The Director [*wissenschaftliche Direktorin*] currently co-manages one of the main research clusters, in addition to managing the institute. The Commission does not concur with ZOiS that the Director should focus exclusively on the management of the institute. The Director should always be able to pursue his or her own research projects as well. To this end, a reduction in the administrative workload should be envisaged in order to create more freedom of action for the Director. This would make the position more attractive for future recruitment.

The targeted efforts of the Institute Management to expand personnel capacities by acquiring third-party funding should be positively emphasized.

##### *Personnel Policy*

As part of ZOiS's personnel policy, the contracts signed with the heads of the research clusters and with research staff are initially limited to three years. However, from the very beginning, new staff have the prospect of contract extension following an evaluation of their performance during the initial working period. In the future, ZOiS intends to provide permanent contracts to the heads of the research clusters. The Commission welcomes such a measure. Specifically, the Commission recommends that for a (potentially small) share of the research staff, ZOiS should introduce a system that mimics the university tenure track and which provides participating staff with a path to permanent employment. In this connection, the Institute Management should adopt individualized performance targets for selected researchers, in which the targets to be achieved are formulated both quantitatively and qualitatively. At the end of the probationary period, a performance evaluation should take place to determine whether the staff member should be offered a permanent position. ZOiS's Academic Advisory Board should be involved in this decision-making process.

In general, the Commission recommends a limited offering of permanent positions. While it is acknowledged that ZOiS wants to position itself as a reliable employer and that it attaches great importance to staff retention through permanent appointments, ZOiS should strive for a balance between continuity and flexibility in personnel matters. On the one hand, personnel policy should aim to preserve the expertise necessary for performing the institute's work. On the other hand, an excessively high share of permanent employees will narrow the opportunities to pursue new topics and develop novel momentum. Finding the right balance between staff turnover and continuity in research work is thus a permanent challenge. In addition, ZOiS should not ignore the fact that its current policy of making staff members permanent may lead to a high degree of inflexibility in future years, given the low staff turnover that can be reasonably anticipated. At the same time, if there is no prospect of a possible permanent appointment at a later date because all positions are filled, this also reduces the likelihood that good researchers will remain at ZOiS or consider working at ZOiS in the first place. The Commission views having 50% of researchers in budgeted positions working on temporary contracts to be appropriate in order to maintain the necessary degree of flexibility in personnel matters.

### *Institute Management*

The fact that the current Director of ZOiS fulfils her leadership position as part of a joint appointment with Humboldt University is an impressive testament to the research of the institute and strength of its ties within academia. The joint appointment has led to a noticeable intensification of the cooperation between ZOiS and Humboldt University Berlin, and presents various opportunities for ZOiS, including opportunities to participate in university teaching; to further the careers of doctoral candidates and young researchers; to develop regional competence networks; and to integrate students and young researchers into ZOiS's work. The Foundation Council should again seek a



joint appointment with a university – preferably, but not necessarily, in Berlin – when a new Director is appointed, prospectively in 2026. Alternatively, the Commission suggests that the full professor of a German (or international) university be granted a leave of absence for the period of their activity as Director of ZOiS, as is standard practice when full-time directors are appointed to the institutes of the Max Weber Foundation – German Humanities Institutes Abroad.

In any event, ZOiS should undertake an open and international call for applications for the position of Director and should select a candidate within the framework of an appointment procedure that includes in equal measure an assessment of academic reputation, political knowledge in the subject area, and management expertise.

In the Commission's view, the Director of the institute should be appointed as a general rule on a fixed-term basis (i.e. for five years) with the possibility of (multiple) extensions.

Like the Director, the current Administrative Director has been working at the institute with great success since the founding of ZOiS in October 2016. In order to ensure continuity in human resources for the fulfillment of ongoing responsibilities, including the services provided to researchers, the Administrative Director should be offered a permanent employment contract, and no longer employed on a time-limited basis.

### *Administration*

ZOiS's administrative department works efficiently and supports the employees in their work in an extremely professional manner. However, in view of the large number of responsibilities that fall to the administrative department and the strong increase in the institute's headcount, the administrative department's human resources are tight. An additional position in third-party funding management for the management of project accounting could provide relief in terms of personnel, but would initially have to be made contingent on the further development of third-party funding at ZOiS. This might also need special personnel for third party project generation.

### *Working at ZOiS*

The working atmosphere at ZOiS is characterized by open discussion and creative exploration, yet is also very performance-oriented. ZOiS's organizational structure is marked by flat hierarchies, transparent communication, and the pronounced involvement of employees in planning and decision-making processes. The high level of job satisfaction among employees became very clear in the discussions during the evaluation visit; ZOiS is clearly an attractive employer. However, the advantageous flat hierarchies stand in the way of career advancement within ZOiS. Personnel development arrangements for employees at every career level exist only in rudimentary form and should be expanded and institutionalized to a greater extent.

From its discussions with staff, the Commission gained the impression that, as a result of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, various formats for internal communication have been offered and taken advantage of with reduced frequency. It should be a matter of concern for the Institute Management to ensure a productive exchange between the individual teams and departments, in order to fulfill the increased demands on internal communication within a growing institute.

ZOiS is extremely dedicated to the issue of work–life balance, and offers very pragmatic solutions overall. Employees can take advantage of part-time models, flexible working hours, and extensive opportunities to work at home or remotely. ZOiS should establish a works council once its founding/initial growth phase is complete. Until it's establishment, alternative non-formalised procedures (e.g. a regular anonymous employees' survey, roles of persons on a position of trust for different types of employees) could be established in the nearer future. Gender equality is ensured at ZOiS thanks to a Gender Equality Plan. Of the 46 employees working at ZOiS at the end of 2021, 34 were women. ZOiS should systematically embed gender equality aspects in all resource and people-related decisions.

#### B.4.3 Offices and library

##### *Offices*

The institute's office arrangements at the Mohrenstrasse address in Berlin can be described as adequate, but barely so. While the rooms were still quite generously sized as the institute was founded, they were quickly completely occupied as the number of employees grew. Despite the conversion of a conference room into workstations due to a lack of space and the dissolution of a parent–child room for the same reason, the current space situation remains cramped. ZOiS should consider alternative workplace models (e.g. hot desks) to alleviate the space situation, and should also expand existing remote work arrangements. During the Commission's discussions, it became clear that many employees (especially researchers) work at home during a large part of their working hours. Nevertheless, if the long-envisioned fellowship program, another key aspect of the institute's development, is implemented, the existing space will likely no longer be adequate. With regard to the institute's office accommodations, the Commission believes that the adoption of a solution that leads to a substantial improvement would then become unavoidable.

##### *Library*

The current arrangements for accessing research literature and other information resources at ZOiS are not considered adequate by the Commission. The current practice of using private access accounts urgently needs to be replaced by an access solution for relevant electronic resources in Eastern European studies that meets general standards.

It should be examined whether access to the electronic resources of the respective university libraries could be obtained through the signing of cooperation agreements with Humboldt University and other universities. It would also be conceivable that the management of Humboldt University as well as the university library would be willing to provide this access to all research employees of the institute for the duration of their employment by means of an addendum to the existing cooperation agreement, because without access to electronic resources, research is extremely difficult (and is becoming ever-more so). If costs are incurred due to the signing of such an addendum, it is strongly recommended that the funding body provide the institute with the necessary additional funding as part of a “literature budget.” The Commission calls upon the institute and the funding body to work together to find a solution that will allow all of the institute’s research staff to access electronic resources.

#### B.4.4 Finances

The Commission expressly commends the funding body’s commitment to financing ZOiS’s activities. While ZOiS was granted €850k in the first year of its founding, the annual grant was €3 million 2021. Accordingly, the institute’s budget is slightly below that of comparable non-university institutions engaged in Eastern European research.<sup>3</sup> For the institute to achieve its ambitious goals and continue its positive development, further growth is essential. As noted above, additional funding is needed for the literature budget, the financing of the Fellow Program, and a possible increase in administrative staff (for third-party funding management and generation). ZOiS’s institutional budget should be adjusted accordingly in order to fulfill the described growth aims.

Funding at ZOiS is allocated in a very detailed-oriented way. It is only possible to reallocate funding during the course of the fiscal year following approval by the funding body. The Commission believes that arrangements that provide greater allocative flexibility are required. For example, it should be possible to freely shift funding back and forth between budget items that are categorized as “flexible.” It should also be possible to carryover unexpended funding to the following budget year, and to amass reserves for the fulfillment of specific goals (whether research-related or otherwise). It is recommended that the funding body examine these options for augmenting flexibility and to use them to enable ZOiS to manage its budget globally.

The Commission emphatically welcomes the intentions of the Institute Management to bring third-party funding on a more permanent footing in the coming years, and to increase it as far as possible. ZOiS should consciously aim to achieve greater

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. German Science and Humanities Council: Recommendations for the Further Development of Non-University Historical Research on Eastern Europe, Berlin 2013.

diversification in funding sources as part of the financing of future growth. It should be recognized that the acquisition of competitively awarded third-party funds is an important instrument for quality assurance. The fact that ZOiS is capable of successfully acquiring third-party funding has been impressively demonstrated by various funding awards for projects, including the BMBF-funded competence network “Conflict and Cooperation in Eastern Europe” (KonKoop) and ERC Starting Grant received at the beginning of 2022 for the project “Moving Russia(ns): Intergenerational Transmission of Memories Abroad and at Home” (MoveMeRu). In this connection, the institute should make greater efforts to attract EU funding and associated international cooperation partners.

Regardless of opportunities for third-party funding, the Commission considers it crucial that the funding body provides ZOiS with reliable funding commitments, in order to assure a sufficiently sound basis for planning future activities.

The Commission encourages ZOiS to seek new private backers with whom contracts do not yet exist, and, in this connection, to develop its network of funders and partners.