Address by the President of the Max Planck Society,
Professor Martin Stratmann,
at the rally concluding the Munich "March for Science",
22.04.2017,
Siegestor, Munich.

Please note that this is a translation from German into English for convenience only.

Dear Colleagues, dear citizens,

I am delighted that so many of you are here today to show your support for science and for scientific freedom. And I am particularly pleased to see so many young faces: You, our young generation, embody the future of free science in Germany. In our country, the freedom of science – alongside freedom of opinion, and freedom of the press – is a basic right. All three are indispensable for the open exchange of ideas in a democratic society. Defending these three fundamental values is in all of our interests. As German history has taught us, science is only as free as society itself. So for me personally, it is important to be here for the March for Science in two capacities: as a scientist, and as a citizen living in an open-minded, pluralist society.

We are all here today because we wish to show solidarity with those experiencing restrictions of their civil liberties. Because as scientists, and also as citizens, what happens in our immediate neighbourhood down-river on the Danube, on the Bosporus, or indeed on the other side of the Atlantic, is a matter of concern to us.

Scientific freedom means being free to decide which course of research to pursue – without political influence or instructions. Free science can be uncomfortable – and in fact, sometimes, must be uncomfortable. Because science often yields results that not everyone wishes to hear. Results which have consequences that force us to step out of our comfort zone, because they may conflict either with economic goals, or even with the authority of the state.

This applies to issues such as climate change, the protection of the environment, social inequality, or migration. And so there have always been attempts to restrict science:

• by dismantling structures that are essential for free science,

• by limiting the funding for certain subject areas,

• by making laws to close down scientific institutions, as is currently happening in Hungary,

• by turning scientists out onto the street or even locking them away, as is currently happening in Turkey.

Science needs internationality, it needs diversity, and it needs freedom. Only where all these conditions are fulfilled can science be conceivable. This applies in the globalized world of the 21st Century more than ever before.

This is worth coming out onto the streets for! Because as current events demonstrate, social and scientific freedom cannot be taken for granted. Even in our own ranks, we feel the pressure on scientists, given that there are scientists from over 100 countries on this earth working at the Max Planck Society.

And of course we feel it,

• when visiting scientists from Turkey are forced to abandon their research projects at our Institutes because they have been ordered back home,

• when the opportunities for non-German Max Planck scientists to travel are restricted by tighter entry requirements, or

• when open discussion and the exchange of ideas on certain subjects is impeded.

Both as citizens and as scientists in Germany, we are free to speak and write on any subject. But beyond our borders, national laws and cultural restraints can create a very different situation. We must therefore be vigilant and act promptly to counter any creeping erosion of scientific freedom especially in Europe. Just like freedom of opinion and freedom of the press, the freedom of science is one of the cornerstones of every democratic society.

Our democratic society is dependent on critical thinking and informed analysis. Knowledge derived from the natural as well as the social sciences and humanities provides the facts that are a key foundation for political decisions.

The findings of science are a driving force and a guarantee of progress – they safeguard our ability to survive. This, however, must not make science arrogant. As scientists, we must always be keenly aware of the limited nature of our knowledge. We must always be aware, too, of our responsibility to humanity and society. Science must – probably more even than in the past – engage in a dialogue to ensure that scientific findings are understood, and that society can decide how to proceed on the basis of the knowledge available.

But what we must be on guard against are so-called “alternative facts”. Assertions that are made, despite conflicting with current knowledge, simply in order to confuse people, to consciously misguide them, and cause them to act in ways that in reality run counter to their interests.

We cannot accept that at a time when humanity is reshaping this planet as never before in history, decisions should be made without recourse to scientific facts. We must not pretend to more ignorant than we are.

And there is one thing that we have learned: social and scientific freedom cannot be taken for granted. I know that the world around us is becoming ever more complex. And the problems that we as a modern soci-

ety face are complex and often hard to comprehend, too. The truth is, they are also difficult for scientists to understand, because every question that we think we have just answered opens the door for many new questions in turn. This is why it is easy for a gap to open between scientists on the one hand, and citizens on the other. A gap that then provides the basis for “alternative facts” which appear persuasive due to their very simplicity.

As scientists we must therefore never tire of discussing these complex problems with people on the street, to make sure that we can bridge this gap and deprive such 'alternative facts' of their credibility. Because the freedom that we as scientists enjoy goes hand in hand with a great responsibility: The responsibility to make our work the subject of public debate and to explain our findings.

Science’s great power lies not in its ability to create unalterable truths – that would be asking far too much of it – but in the wide range of possibilities that become accessible to society through scientific discoveries. These possibilities bring us freedom of choice. This is what science can do – no more, but equally, no less.

Thank you all for coming today!