

**Ms Frédérique Vidal
Minister of Higher Education,
Research and Innovation
of the French Republic**

Dear Minister,

I feel it is my duty to express my opinion on the contents of your letter addressed to your Polish counterpart Deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Gowin – Minister of Science and Higher Education. Your letter addresses the course of the conference organized on 21-22 February 2019 by EHESS, CNRS, the Strasbourg University and the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah. I fully support your concern for the freedom of speech and expression, which are particularly important in scientific debates. I do believe that the readiness to publish the effects of scientific work and confront our own conclusions with the current state of research and the expertise of other scientists is the basis for the enrichment of our knowledge about the world that surrounds us.

Unfortunately, I must point out that the statements about the Institute of National Remembrance and its employees which were included in your letter differ from the actual situation and therefore are extremely harmful for our institution. I do believe that it is because you have been misled by an incomplete or biased description of the course of the conference. The suggestion that the representative of the Institute of National Remembrance was able to freely express any comprehensive opinions does not reflect the reality. I regret to say that the French organizer did not provide the conditions which would grant all participants an equal right of expression during the discussion time.

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As regards the scope of participation of the Institute of National Remembrance in this event, first of all, I kindly inform you that among the speakers and guests there were no official representatives of the Institute. The French organizers did not consider it appropriate to invite anyone from the IPN to actively participate in the conference. It is all the more incomprehensible considering that - despite the title of the conference - one of the lectures was entirely devoted to the Institute of National Remembrance itself. Of course, the selection of speakers and topics depends exclusively on the organizers of the conference. However, it is worth emphasising at this point that the use of the ancient principle *audiatur et altera pars* always fosters the elaboration of conclusions which are more objective and not biased in advance and can be presented to the readers as well as the conference audience.

As for the audience, two history scientists - employees of the Institute who specialize in the history of the Second World War and the post-war period participated in the conference. They were the researchers from the Cracow branch of IPN and one of them was the author of a scientific review of the latest large publication by a group of authors who represented the community presented at the conference as the "Nouvelle École Polonaise de la Shoah". Both of them, due to their research, were interested in the participation in the discussion on particular lectures and trusted the announcement that the conference would be of an open nature.

The author of the review wanted to express his readiness to participate in free discussion, also with the authors of the publication that he reviewed, in line with the rules of scientific research. After all, reliable researchers whose findings are the effect of their hard work on historical sources, should not be afraid of any open scientific discussion. In Poland, reviewing someone's publication and mutual discussion is a standard practice in academic work - even in the case of divergent opinions or critical remarks made based on source content. We assumed that the freedom of scientific research and the freedom of participation in discussions during scientific conferences, also these organized in France, does not deviate from generally accepted standards of the scientific world.

Already after the first series of lectures, one of the scientists employed by the IPN was denied the right to speak during the discussion time. He tried to kindly correct before the audience at least a part of the false accusations made in the lectures of the organizers and speakers. These accusations concerned also the IPN (and more broadly the entire Polish state). The microphone was taken away from him, even though his speech referred to the theses laid down in the part of the conference which was subject to the discussion that just begun. The organizers also did not allow him to raise subjects which were important from the perspective of the aspects of the occupation reality in the years 1939-1945, which had been addressed.

As the first day of the debate continued, the historians from the Institute were still not allowed to speak and were denied equal rights with other participants of the discussion. During a break, when they asked whether, after the lecture on the Institute of National Remembrance which was planned for the next day, any comment by the historian working in this institution would be admissible, they were promised that their question would be answered on the following day.

One cannot help noticing that such practices are uncommon during scientific seminars.

On the second day of the conference, the author of the review was completely banned from participation in substantive discussions which took place after the lectures. His repeated attempts to join the discussion within the scheduled time were ostentatiously ignored by the organizers. He was not allowed to take the floor even once, even though there were not too

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many people willing to speak. Such behaviour can hardly be considered a sign of respect for the freedom of scientific discourse. It should be emphasised that the intention of both scientists was to address the matters of substance relating to the lectures which have been presented.

On the second day of the conference, the other researcher was informed that, after the lecture on the Institute of National Remembrance, he would be granted five minutes for his speech. He spent this time correcting certain statements that were made during the lectures preceding his speech. He also tried to paint the real picture of the Institute's work before the French audience, and explain that, despite all previous accusations, the freedom of scientific research does not conflict with the duties of the IPN officials, which consist in i.a. building and renovation of monuments and cemeteries, including these of the Holocaust victims. His speech was free of any confrontational elements – which presented the real intentions of the scientists who tried to participate in the discussion. After a short speech, stopped precisely after five minutes, he thanked for this small gesture on the part of the organizers. Unfortunately, he was not informed that his balanced speech would be combined with an additional comment of a representative of the organizers, the nature of which was far from the scientific debate. He could not respond to that. This was the only time when the IPN historians were allowed to speak during the two days of the conference.

I am describing these details so you can assess yourself whether the rules of free speech have been respected here. Of course, we do not impose our assessment of the facts. If EHESS provides you with the official recordings of the conference, you will be able to form your own opinion. You will also be able to compare the abovementioned speeches and decide which one meets the standards of the scientific community, which encourages discussions without anger and hatred. We are convinced that the reference to the audio recordings is the best solution in this situation.

Therefore I requested the President of EHESS, Mr Christophe Prochasson to provide the official recordings of the conference. I must mention that the audience was not allowed to record the sound in any way. Such restrictions are generally not common nowadays at scientific conferences open to the public. Another thing is that also at scientific conferences organized by the Institute interrupting speakers in any way or hampering their lectures is unacceptable. The rules of culture and good behaviour should apply to everyone.

In normal circumstances, there is time for criticisms against the speakers during the discussion, when the audience as well as the lecturers may comment on the theses presented. I have no doubt that this conference would have also benefited if the freedom of discussion had been guaranteed and the speakers had been more diversified.

I am convinced that when the officials subordinate to you listen to the entire recording of the conference they will be able to provide you with more objective picture of the events, which will show the behaviour of the organizers as well as the audience. It will allow you to assess whether there were in fact any incidents during the debate which can be regarded as anti-Semitic. It is worth noticing that the Institute of National Remembrance did not undertake any activities discrediting the conference during its duration through its social media.

The institute consequently condemns all incidents resulting from national, racial or religious prejudices and notes with concern the reports on the increase of the number thereof in Western European countries. Therefore we understand your concern and your need to react. Nevertheless, in cases like this, we should always assess the confirmed facts - regardless of the social or national group we are talking about. However we have not received any reliable

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confirmation that there were any incidents of this kind during the conference. If there are any negative behaviours which suggest national, racial or religious prejudices – they always deserve unambiguous condemnation.

As regards the course of the conference, it seems appropriate that in the future opinions on the scientists who were not allowed to freely participate in the conference discussions, as described above, were formulated more carefully.

I am convinced that it is the full transparency of the scientific actions, the readiness to confront our findings with the research of others and the openness of discussion that will make the real scientific growth possible. I do fully agree with you that “freedom of scientific research is the heart of common European identity”. It is essential that these rules are respected in all countries.

Yours sincerely,

Cc.:

1. Jarosław Gowin, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Science and Higher Education;
2. Professor Jacek Czaputowicz Dr. Habil., Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland;
3. His Excellency Tomasz Młynarski, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Poland in the French Republic and the Principality of Monaco;
4. Professor Jerzy Duszyński Dr. Habil, president of the Polish Academy of Sciences