Universität Potsdam

President's New Year's Reception 2025

Acceptance Speech | Prof. Dr. Rosario Figari Layús, Recipient of the 2025 Voltaire Prize

Dear President Prof. Oliver Günther,
Dear Dr. Friede Springer,
Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased and honored to receive the Voltaire Prize for Tolerance, International Understanding and Respect for Difference for the year 2025.
I would like to express my sincere thanks for the award. For me, this is not only an important recognition of my previous scientific work and my commitment to human rights, peace research and academic freedom, particularly in Latin America. Rather, the award also offers the opportunity to give these topics and the current challenges in these fields more visibility.
Therefore, I would like to emphasize the relevance and timeliness of the values honored and promoted by the Voltaire Prize, especially in the current context, in which tolerance, international understanding and respect for difference are being strongly challenged by authoritarian tendencies at the national and international level and are at risk.
I would like to emphasize the fact that I am able to be here today to receive this award is not only the result of an individual effort, but also the result of a great deal of collective, individual and institutional support, both in my home country of Argentina and in my second home, Germany. One of these institutions is the University of Buenos Aires, where I studied sociology about 20 years ago. It is an institution where I not only received an academic education, but also learned about fundamental values such as the defense of human rights, the importance of collective work and struggles, and solidarity. There I had the opportunity to meet academics and fellow students who were committed to tackling the difficult social reality of the country. During this time, I had the opportunity to work on a research project. The aim was to build up an archive of statements and experiences of victims of the last civil-military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983) and thus contribute to the social processing of the past. The project was made possible by the university's collaboration with the Asociación de ex Detenidos y Desaparecidos, a human rights organization founded by survivors of illegal secret detention and torture during the dictatorship.
From this first research project, I took with me the deep conviction that it is important to combine research, teaching and the defense of human rights, the search for justice and truth for the victims of crimes against humanity and peace education. Since then, I have had the privilege of participating in various projects in Latin America and Germany that have done this in different ways. All these projects underscore the great importance, but also the necessity, of strengthening cooperation and dialogue

between universities and civil society. This is not only important for the development of practice-oriented theory and teaching, but also for the exchange of knowledge and the enrichment of public debates. These debates can make an important contribution to strengthening democratization, diversity and ensuring that past violence is not repeated.

Today, however, we unfortunately see that critical academics, students and civil-society stakeholders who stand up for human rights in many countries, including my home country, are facing even greater challenges. In Argentina, under the current government of the extreme right, many human rights defenders, researchers, women's rights activists and other critical stakeholders have repeatedly been the target of various forms of attack and defamation campaigns.

Paradoxically, in 2023, the 40th anniversary of the transition to democracy in Argentina, a government came to power that spreads hate speech and contempt for human rights and those who defend them. During the dictatorship in Argentina, an estimated 30,000 people disappeared. In the last 40 years, it was human rights organizations, the victims' collectives and the families of the disappeared who have fought for the pursuit of truth, remembrance and justice and have achieved very significant successes. These achievements include the criminal prosecution of numerous military personnel and civilians responsible for serious human rights violations during this period. I analyzed the significance of these prosecutions for the politics of remembrance and reparation in my dissertation. Unfortunately, many of these advances are now being questioned and jeopardized by the government, which denies or even justifies many of the crimes committed during the dictatorship.

The country's public universities and recognized research institutions are also the target of smear campaigns and defamation by the government, which denies the importance of scientific knowledge and scientists on important issues such as climate change. The attacks on universities and research institutions constitute a serious violation of academic freedom. These are further exacerbated by significant budget cuts, which in several cases even call into question the continuity of activities.

Unfortunately, we note that this is not an Argentinian phenomenon, but rather a global trend. In recent years, the increasing influence of authoritarian governments and radicalization tendencies in various regions of the world have led to a dramatic restriction of civil society and academic freedom of action. This means, on the one hand, the restriction of fundamental rights such as freedom of assembly, association and freedom of expression. On the other hand, critical voices of activists, human rights defenders, academics and journalists who are inconvenient for governments or other powerful stakeholders are being obstructed in their work. The critical voices are being intimidated with threats and defamation campaigns, criminalized or even physically attacked. In this context, research, reporting or advocacy for human rights has become a risky task, especially for those working to protect the environment, land rights and indigenous peoples, and to promote women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights. Attacks take many forms – legal, financial, physical, online – and are truly global. This means that we are seeing this problematic development in different facets and forms in Europe and in some places in Germany as well.

Latin America is the region with the highest levels of violence and social inequality. In recent years, spaces for activism and critical research have been severely restricted in several Latin American countries. Research on critical topics such as human rights, natural resources, gender and marginalized groups pose great risks for many scientists working in contexts of extreme violence, authoritarianism and discrimination in Latin America. For this reason, I and other colleagues founded an international network to raise national and international awareness of the risks and threats faced by scientists, to promote support services and to contribute to the development of joint coping strategies. This led to the creation of the network “Academicxs en Riesgo” (Engl. “Academics at Risk”), which aims to help raise international awareness of the risk and threat many academics in Latin America face and to disseminate and promote support offers. In this context, I consider it extremely important that the role

of universities is not only in the production and transfer of knowledge, but also in the active support of those who work for human rights, freedom of science, peace promotion and democracy from within science and civil society. In this regard, a joint project was granted by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, which I will lead together with Prof. Paul Gready (University of York) and whose topic is: “Activists in Exile in an Era of Mass Displacement: Universities as Sites of Protection and Agency Supporters for Activists from Russia and Myanmar”. The aim of the project is to analyze the role that universities can play in protecting threatened human rights and environmental activists in different regions of the world. The project has a strong practical focus, as the research results should also serve to provide universities and political decision-makers with “good practices” for supporting vulnerable groups.
In this difficult environment, the Voltaire Prize is for me (and hopefully for many others) an encouragement to continue to work for human rights, peace, freedom of expression and science, and respect for otherness.
Last but not least, I would like to thank the people and institutions with whom I have had the privilege of working over the years, not only in academia but also in civil society. These include, among others: the Universidad de Buenos Aires, the Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos, kolko Menschenrechte für Kolumbien e.V., Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Universität Potsdam, Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte e.V., Freie Universität Berlin, Universität Heidelberg, Universität Konstanz, Universität Bielefeld, Universität Marburg, Brot für die Welt e.V., Universität Gießen, das Institut Capaz, Scholars at Risk, York University and now the University of Bonn. I also deeply appreciate the freedom, trust and support I have always received from these various institutions and individuals – including my family as well as my superiors, colleagues and friends – for my work and commitment. In this sense, I would like to appeal to the importance of solidarity and humanity at all levels – individual, collective, institutional and international. In the knowledge of the painful consequences of armed conflicts, authoritarian politics and social exclusion, prizes such as the Voltaire Prize are of great importance in the fight for what has become a motto of hope and democratic values in Argentina, but also in many other countries: Nunca Mas (Never Again).

Prof. Dr. Rosario Figari Layús is an assistant professor of reconciliation research in sociology and at the Center for Reconciliation Research at the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn. She has a degree in Sociology from the University of Buenos Aires in Argentina and a Master's in Political Science from the Humboldt University of Berlin. At the Philipps-Universität Marburg, she received her doctorate in political science with a thesis on the social impact of criminal proceedings for human rights violations in Argentina. Her research interests are human rights, peace and reconciliation research, transitional justice, political and gender-based violence, and academic freedom. She has worked as a researcher and lecturer at various institutions, such as the University of Buenos Aires, the Free University of Berlin, the University of Heidelberg, the University of Bielefeld, the University of Marburg, the University of Konstanz and the University of Gießen. Figari Layús is the author of several books and essays on human rights and peace research in Latin America, including: The Reparative Effects of Human Rights Trials. Lessons from Argentina (Transitional Justice Series, Rourledge), The Role of transitional Justice in the midst of ongoing Armed Conflicts: the Case of Colombia (Potsdam University Press, 2010) and Los Juicios por sus protagonistas en Argentina (The Argentinean trials for human rights violations from the perspective of their main protagonists, Eduvim).
In 2018, together with colleagues, she founded the international network “Academicxs en Riesgo” (in English ‘Academics at Risk’), which aims to raise international awareness of the risks and threats faced by academics in Latin America, promote support services and develop joint coping strategies.