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AMS and ICM 2022¹

The next International Congress of Mathematicians is scheduled to take place in Saint Petersburg, Russia in July 2022. The upcoming ICM represents unique challenges for the American Mathematical Society in terms of its commitments to upholding fundamental human rights, promoting free, open, tolerant and democratic society as well as ensuring free exchange of scientific information and free scientific collaborations across borders and cultures. For the last twenty years Russia labored under the increasingly oppressive and authoritarian regime of Vladimir Putin. Internal opposition has been suppressed and effectively purged from political representation. The government controls most of mass media and, increasingly, the internet as well. Opposition leaders, such as Alexei Navalny, have been subjected to persecution, murder and assassination attempts by government agents, both at home and abroad. The state exercises increasingly repressive and discriminatory anti-LGBT policies, including the infamous 2013 “gay propaganda” law.

The case of Azat Miftakhov exemplifies Russia’s human rights problems. Miftakhov, a mathematics PhD student at the Moscow State University, was arrested in February 2019 in Moscow on a putative vandalism charge related to a political protest action. The only physical damage during that protest was a broken window. Miftakhov, who pleaded not guilty to the charges, was held in pretrial confinement for almost two years and subjected to significant mistreatment and possible torture by the authorities. Numerous mathematical and scientific organizations, including the AMS, and other groups of academics, both internationally and within Russia, spoke in support of Miftakhov. Nevertheless, on January 18, 2021 a court in Moscow found Miftakhov guilty of hooliganism and handed him a grossly excessive sentence of six years in prison.

During the ongoing Navalny protests in Moscow and other cities across Russia, numerous scientists, including mathematicians, have been arrested, fined and given jail sentences. The case of Alexander Kuznetsov, an eminent Russian algebraic geometer, an ICM speaker and a corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who was arrested at a protest in Moscow on January 31, 2021, gained particular attention of mathematicians around the world.

All these issues raise the question of how the AMS and the U.S. mathematical community should respond to the upcoming ICM 2022. There have already been public calls for a boycott of the ICM. Personally, I hope that a boycott will not become necessary. However, an open discussion of the matter in the AMS is certainly needed. In my view, the situation cannot be treated as a logistical issue but rather should be approached primarily as a question of values and principles.

In a January 2021 letter to the International Science Council, the Executive Committee of the International Mathematical Union wrote: “The IMU rejects all boycotts of scientific events (as does the ISC) and all attempts to link scientific activities to political and societal issues.” I believe the AMS cannot adopt such an absolutist approach. The details matter and the circumstances matter.

We need to find a way to balance the desire for free and unencumbered exchange of scientific information with our commitments to human rights and free

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and democratic society. Ultimately, the former requires the latter, as truly free exchange of scientific knowledge is impossible under an authoritarian rule. We also need to guard against the possibility that the Russian government intends to use the ICM as a major propaganda vehicle. Several signs already point in that direction. Dmitry Chernyshenko, Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, co-chairs the Executive Organizing Committee of the ICM. The EOC features several other members of Putin's government, including a high-ranking FSB official, Dmitry Derevyashkin. This level of involvement by prominent government figures in the ICM organization is unprecedented in the ICM history.

At a minimum, I believe that the AMS will need to publicly acknowledge valid concerns raised by the mathematical community about the situation in Russia in relation to ICM 2022. The AMS will also need to provide some guidance for those American mathematicians who decide to attend the ICM regarding how they could support human rights and pro-democracy causes, especially as related to academia, while in Russia, if they so choose. If the Russian government continues to jail its bright young mathematical minds like Azat Miftakhov and its preeminent mathematical figures like Alexander Kuznetsov, it will become harder and harder for the AMS and the international mathematical community to accept holding ICM 2022 in Russia.

I am unsure how exactly a public AMS discussion about ICM 2022 should be organized. But I am certain that this conversation is worth having.

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