

**TAKING SIDES:  
Geombinatorics' Response to the War and Boycotts  
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*We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor,  
never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor,  
never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere.*

– Elie Wiesel, 1986 Peace Nobel Prize Laureate<sup>1</sup>

**March 2014.** Russian President Vladimir Putin illegally invades and annexes Ukrainian Crimea. Putin also dramatically amplifies the discontent in the Southwestern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, criminally sends there Russian military with tanks and artillery, and illegally establishes the separatist Donetsk Peoples Republic (DPR) and Luhansk Peoples Republic (LPR). At first glance Putin's goal appears to prevent Ukraine from joining the European Union (EU) and NATO one way or another. He is willing to give DPR and LPR back to Ukraine if representatives of separatists in Rada (Ukrainian Parliament) would have a veto right. Otherwise he counts on Ukraine to not be admitted to EU and NATO because it does not have well defined borders due to the regions occupied by DPR and LPR.

Right in 2014, I am finishing my 20-year long project of writing a historical book about scholars in Nazi Germany and in the Post W.W.II Netherlands during its de-Nazification. The working title is "Life and Fate" with next to last chapter 42 entitled "The Scholar and the State." That chapter shows similarities between many Russian cultural icons jumping on Putin's March-2014 bandwagon and German cultural elites joining Hitler as soon as his victory is assured. In this chapter, I quote the letter which states, "We firmly declare our support for the position of the President of the Russian Federation on Ukraine and Crimea" and is signed by 511 Russian dignitaries. It still decorates the web page of the Russian Ministry of Culture and is preserved on many other media sites. I realize

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<sup>1</sup> Elie Wiesel, *The Night Trilogy: Night, Dawn, The Accident*.

the high urgency of ‘now’ and entitle the whole book with the title of chapter 42: *The Scholar and the State* [S].

**August 2018.** The General Assembly (GA) of the International Mathematics Union (IMU) meeting in São Paulo, Brazil, approves my persistent call for changing the name of one of IMU’s main prizes, *The Rolf Nevanlinna Prize*. Needless to say I am pleased that the name of this Hitler lover and SS recruiter is replaced [by *The IMU Abacus Medal*], even though IMU never publicly explains the reason for the name change.

At the same meeting, by a vote of 83 to 63, GA grants the next 2022 International Congress of Mathematicians (ICM) to Saint Petersburg, Russia. Apparently, for IMU the illegal annexation of Ukrainian Crimea by Russia, and criminal incitement of separation from Ukraine of Donetsk and Luhansk regions with the use of Russian military force (“not a regular Russian army,” Putin later explains) and Russian tanks and rockets is not important enough to choose a non-rogue host country for its Congress. Is Saint Petersburg attractive to IMU due to Russian government’s co-organizing and financing the Congress? Some mathematicians immediately protest Russian hosting of ICM in a petition, detailing Russian assault on Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk and numerous human rights violations in Russia, calling for a boycott of the Russian Congress and of any engagement in a collaborative work inside Russia.

Masha Vlasenko of the Institute of Mathematics of the Polish Academy of Sciences spearheads the petition. Apparently, I am 14<sup>th</sup> to sign it. With my signature, I include my justification for signing the petition:

I am grateful to the July 29-30, 2018, General Assembly (GA) of the International Mathematics Union (IMU) for following my urging and deciding to replace the name of Rolf Nevanlinna, a Hitler supporter, on its prize and medal. However, GA erred in granting criminal tyrant Putin a propaganda tool by selecting Russia for hosting ICM-2022. War on Georgia [2008], Annexation of Crimea, War on Ukraine, etc., etc., etc. are the gravest violations of the international law, and must not be rewarded. I do not think that for countries to order their mathematicians not to attend is right. I support the boycott on the individual level, by those who are not only mathematicians, but also human beings of high moral standards.

As I understand, about 380 signatures are collected:  
<http://www.icm2022boycott.org/#signatories> .

**February 22, 2022.** Russia sends the so-called “peacekeeping force” to DPR and LPR. (Trump calls Putin “genius” for sending the peacekeeping force on tanks.)

**February 24, 2022.** Putin orders the so-called “special military operation” in Ukraine, which is, in fact, an all-out war on Ukraine by the Russian army of ca. 190,000. A new law is introduced in early March-2022 that provides up to 15 years of free food and lodging in prison for anyone spreading “feik [sic] news” about the “special military operation,” for example, by calling it “invasion” or “war.” Even a banner for “peace” is interpreted as a crime.

My quarter-a-century long friend and the great Polish film director Andrzej Wajda writes [W]:

So many people ... seem ready and willing to sacrifice the common good for the sake of their own immediate comfort, people for whom the word “peace” seems nothing more than “leave me in peace,” or “don’t bother me.”

Andrzej refers to filmmakers, but isn’t it even more true about mathematicians, who often instead of choosing sides choose a sidewalks?

On Saturday, February 26, 2022, I urge the Executive Committee of the World Federation of National Mathematics Competitions to demand from EC of IMU to move or cancel the Russian ICM. Coincidentally, on the same day EC announces that the 2022 Congress will be fully virtual and hosted from outside of Russia. EC releases a letter stating “We strongly condemn the actions by Russia. Our deepest sympathy goes to our Ukrainian colleagues and the Ukrainian people. Given this situation, it is impossible for the IMU to host the ICM and the GA [General Assembly] as traditional in-person events in Russia.”

All prizes, including *Fields Medals*, *The IMU Abacus Medal* (for the first time in 40 years not called *The Rolf Nevanlinna Prize*) are traditionally presented at the Congress. However, this year’s prize ceremony and the General Assembly will be held in person at a not yet decided location outside of Russia.

A group of Russian mathematicians writes an open letter signed by more than 350 people protesting the invasion. “Mathematics has always been one of the few areas of fundamental science in which Russia has maintained a leading world position. As confirmation of this, Russia was supposed to host the most prestigious mathematical conference in the world...,” they write. “In a situation where our country has become a military aggressor and, as a result, a rogue state, Russia’s leadership positions in world mathematics will be irretrievably lost.” Russian scientists and science journalists write another open letter against the invasion that collects nearly 7,000 signatures.

While it is a pleasant surprise to learn that ICM is moved out of Russia, I do not think going virtual is enough. Everyone who has spoken, or written, or otherwise expressed his or her support for Putin’s War of 2008 on Georgia, or Putin’s Wars of 2014 and 2022 on Ukraine must be disinvented from any participation in the Congress. Case in point: Rector of Moscow State University Viktor Sadovnichiy, who happens to be a Professor of Mathematician, is perhaps the most politically influential mathematician of Russia. He is also President of the Russian Union of Rectors, which on March 4, 2022, published a letter signed by 184 rectors <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27373/4554795/> :

Deeply respected colleagues!

Before our eyes, events are taking place that disturb every citizen of Russia. This is Russia’s decision to finally end the eight-year confrontation between Ukraine and Donbass, achieve the demilitarization [sic] and denazification [sic] of Ukraine, and thereby protect itself (!) from growing military threats.

We, the Rectors’ Corps of the Russian Federation, have been developing and strengthening Russian-Ukrainian scientific and educational ties for many decades, treating each other with care. Our joint research has made a huge contribution to world science, so the long-term tragedy in Donbass resonates with particular pain and bitterness in our hearts.

It is very important these days to support our country, our army (!), which defends our security, to support our President, who, perhaps, suffered but made the most difficult but necessary decision in his life.

It is important not to forget about our main duty – to conduct a continuous educational process, to instill patriotism in young people, the desire to help the Motherland. <snip>



Viktor Sadovnichiy, Professor of Mathematics, Rector of Moscow State University, A supporter of Putin's War on Ukraine  
Wikipedia, © council.gov.ru

As the most influential bureaucrat from mathematics, Sadovnichiy has and will likely play a role in the Russian ICM, especially in view of the fact that the Russian government co-organizes and co-funds the Congress. I find his participation in ICM in any capacity untenable and offensive in light of thousands of innocent Ukrainians killed and millions forced to leave behind their life's possessions and go abroad as empty-handed refugees.

This brings a question of boycotts. As a professor of cinema among my other hats, I closely follow events in the film community. On March 7, 2022, the Ukrainian Film Academy starts a petition calling on Film Institutions and Film Professionals to ban all Russian films (as of March 20, 2022, the number of signatures reaches 10,192):

We, the members of the Ukrainian Film Academy, on behalf of the Society of Ukrainian film professionals and cultural figures call for a boycott of Russian cinematography.

As you know, starting in February 2014, the Russian Federation has been waging war against Ukraine, acting as an aggressor. Russia annexed the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and occupied parts of Luhansk and Donetsk regions, territories belonging to Ukraine. The Russian regime regularly commits war crimes against the Ukrainian civilian population, both in the above-mentioned regions and in the adjacent territories.

On February 21, 2022, the Russian Federation recognized the independent quasi-republics "DPR" and "LPR" – within the territories of both occupied and controlled by Ukraine. And also deployed troops here.

On February 24-25, Russia launched rocket attacks across Ukraine and launched an armed offensive in five regions, including its own and Belarus' borders, as well as Crimea.

The outbreak of war in Ukraine is an attack on a civilized world with a democratic system, a crime committed in the heart of Europe. But at a time when world powers are imposing economic and political sanctions on the Russian Federation, the country continues to be active in the cultural field. In particular, several films made by Russia are regularly admitted to the programs of most world film festivals, and significant resources are spent on their promotion.

The result of this activity is not only the spread of propaganda messages and distorted facts. It also boosts the loyalty of Russian culture – the culture of the aggressor state, which unleashed unjustified and unprovoked war in central Europe. Even the very presence of Russian films in the program of world film festivals creates the illusion of Russia's involvement in the values of the civilized world.

Given the above facts, we encourage:

**Council of Europe** – to exclude Russia from the Eurimages and terminate co-production agreements with it. We also call for the exclusion of the Russian Federation from the European Convention on Cinematographic Co-Production.

**Festivals** – not to allow in the competition and non-competition programs films produced by the Russian Federation or in co-production with it. <snip>

The Ukrainian petition produces results. Glasgow and Stockholm International Film Festivals decide to ban all (!) Russian films. Not all festivals agree with the Ukrainian Filmmakers' approach.

The premier Cannes Film Festival disinvites the official Russian Delegation but does not ban the films of Russian directors, some of which risk their careers and even freedom by expressing in their films, interviews, and video clips their opposition to the War on Ukraine and Putin's regime. My friend Andrey Zvyagintsev and Yuri Bykov are clear examples of such bravery.

"Among Russian filmmakers, there are people who have condemned the war, who oppose the regime and openly expressed their condemnation. And in a way they're victims of this whole conflict like the rest of us," the Ukrainian film director Sergei Loznitsa told *The Hollywood Reporter*. "I was hoping that society these days is more intelligent, more sophisticated, than to apply this collective guilt to an entire community," he added.



Sergei Loznitsa, Celebrated Ukrainian Film Director, A strong opponent of Russia's War on Ukraine; Official Website <https://loznitsa.com/vita/>

I completely agree with Sergei Loznitsa, the director of powerful films about Ukrainian tragedies, such as "Donbass", "Maidan", "Baby Yar", who writes in *The Hollywood Reporter*:

If we are talking about this proposal to completely ban, to boycott Russian films and Russian filmmakers from participating in international film festivals, I'm absolutely against this.

**March 14, 2022.** I am asked by a Russian mathematician whether in light of the current affairs he will be banned from publishing his papers in *Geombinatorics*. His question requires my clear public response, which is the goal of this essay.

I am against an indiscriminate boycott of all Russian colleagues based solely on their citizenship. I agree with Sergei Loznitsa, and will decide the Hamletian question, to ban or not to ban, based not on the author's passport, but on the author's words and deeds. Starting immediately, *Geombinatorics* will not knowingly publish authors who in the past did or presently support the Russian wars on Ukraine or Georgia, or wars on other countries that Russia could wage in the future.

**September 1939.** Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union attack Poland. Practically nobody realizes that, in fact, World War II has begun. This realization comes later, perhaps, after April-May 1940, when Hitler invades Norway, Denmark, France, The Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxemburg. In fact, the first to publicly use the term "Second World War" is Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1941. Striking similarities between 1939 and 2022 convince me that World War III has commenced on February 24, 2022, with an all-out Russian war on Ukraine. The world cannot afford to wait for the destruction of Ukraine and Russia's waging wars on Moldova, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. "Complacency is one of the great dangers of history," Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court Mr. Karim Ahmad Khan QC observes in the CNN March 16, 2022, interview with Anderson Cooper. Mr. Khan may end up being the one to prosecute Vladimir Putin for crimes against humanity.

I hope and I hope that leaders of the Free World will be proactive and minimize deaths and destruction that World War III has and will inflict on our little endangered planet.

### **Bibliography**

[S] Alexander Soifer, *The Scholar and the State: In Search of Van der Waerden*, Birkhäuser Springer, Basel, 2015.

[W] Andrzej Wajda, *Double Vision: My Life in Film*. Henry Halt & Co., New York, 1989.