

International Balzan Foundation – 2021 Prizewinners Interdisciplinary Forum

30 June 2022

Welcome address of rector Prof. Dr. Christian Leumann

*The spoken word applies*

Dear president of the Balzan Foundation "Prize",  
Dear president of the Balzan Foundation "Fund",  
Dear chairman of the General Prize Committee,  
Dear president of the Swiss Academies of Arts & Science,  
Dear Balzan Prizewinners,  
Dear ladies and gentlemen,

I warmly welcome you all at the University of Bern on the occasion of the 2021 International Balzan Prizewinners Interdisciplinary Forum. As we know, the International Balzan Foundation promotes culture and science worldwide in the field of humanities and social sciences as well as arts, physics, mathematics, natural sciences and medicine.

The history of the Balzan Foundation and the Balzan prize goes back to Eugenio Balzan, a native of Badia Polesine in northern Italy. He made his entire career at Milan's leading daily newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, first as an editorial assistant, then climbing all the way up to managing director, partner and shareholder of the company. As a consequence of the fascist regime he moved in 1933 to Switzerland, living in Zurich and Lugano. With this, the Swiss connection of the Balzan prize becomes clear.

Very influential, however, was his daughter Angela Lina Balzan, who, in the spirit of her father to generously support charitable projects, and using his legacy, created the Balzan Foundation in 1956 in Lugano.

There are not that many bodies that support the arts and sciences in such a generous way as the Balzan Foundation. In Switzerland, there is only one other foundation I can think of, claiming the same strict rules for excellence in science and having a comparable number of medalists succeeding also to obtain a Nobel Prize. This is the Marcel Benoist Foundation.

It is interesting to see some parallels between Eugenio Balzan and Marcel Benoist, the latter being of French nationality, dedicating his legacy in 1920 to the Swiss confederation with the aim of, I cite: "*to award annually a single prize to a Swiss scholar or a scholar resident in Switzerland who in the course of that year has made the most useful discovery or study in the sciences that is of particular relevance to human life*".

Another common aspect between the two foundations is that in both, officials of the respective governments are involved. The Benoist foundation has amongst its board a deputy of the French Embassy in Switzerland and the Federal Councillor for Science Economy and Innovation, in these days Guy Parmelin, as president. In the international Balzan Foundation there is a delegate designated by the Swiss Federal Council and one designated by the Italian government. This ensures independence in the way how the foundations operate and gives them additional public legitimacy.

Very interestingly, the articles of the international Balzan foundation also state the following: *The Balzan Prize ensures the promotion and recognition of new or emerging fields of study or research that may have been overlooked by other international awards.*

We are here at the interdisciplinarity forum, and if there is one thing that is very often overlooked in science by funding agencies and foundations, then it is the importance of inter- and transdisciplinary research. I think it

is clear to all of us that solutions for today's societal challenges can only be brought about by such approaches. Typical examples are climate change, biodiversity loss, human health (just think on the Covid 19 pandemic) as well as maintaining peace amongst people and nations (just think on the war in Ukraine).

As a comprehensive University with eight faculties we place a high value on interdisciplinarity. For example, we support interfaculty research cooperations where 10 to 12 research groups of at least two, ideally more faculties are collaborating in a bottom-up approach on a given theme of high actuality.

Furthermore we are home to ten research centers of excellence, for example the Oeschger Center for Climate Change Research (OCCR) which combines the expertise of the fields of climate physics, medicine, humanities, economy and law to design ways to minimize and cope with the consequences of climate change. Another example is that of the newly founded Multidisciplinary Center for Infectious Diseases (MCID) in which the fields of immunology, infectiology, preventive medicine, economy, ethics and social sciences join forces to find out how to be better prepared for the next pandemic after Covid 19. These centers represent international highlights of our university and are transdisciplinary by nature.

The articles of the Balzan foundation in addition stipulate that prizewinners must destine half of the prize to finance research projects that are preferably carried out by young scholars or scientists. Encouraging the promotion of early career scientists is again part of the strategy of the University of Bern. We are dedicated to provide an environment where young scientists have excellent conditions to build up their scientific careers, for example by providing protected research time, early scientific independence, and by rethinking career pathways.

All fields of science, but particularly interdisciplinary science dedicated to global societal challenges, are highly international by nature. Unfortunately, the current political situation between Switzerland and the EU

brings with it that the Swiss higher education institutions are largely excluded from the world's largest financed international research network *Horizon Europe*. This is a set-back to international scientific collaborations and it is therefore important to emphasize again and again that taking Switzerland and also the UK as hostages because of political divergences will not help at all to foster science and will produce on the long run no winners but only losers. Unfortunately the voices of science have had no impact so far on the political decision makers. Let's hope that this will change in the very near future.

Let me now finish by saying that it is a great honor for the University of Bern to host today so many excellent researchers from different countries and to hear them speak about their prizewinning research. The basis for prolific scientific networking is given, so please take the chance.