

Call for abstracts

Symposium “Misappropriation and Human Rights Implosion”

6-8 November 2023, Conference Centre Schloss Herrenhausen, Hannover, Germany

In many authoritarian regimes, human rights standards are rapidly regressing, Putin’s Russia, Xi Jinping’s China, and Erdogan’s Turkey being only some examples. The strategies employed in this process vary: while some regimes openly reject human rights as Western and neo-colonial ideas and values, others precisely use human rights language to completely reverse their meaning. This phenomenon of distortion and abuse has been conceptualized as (mis-)appropriation of human rights, defined as the “deployment by a particular set of actors of a range of strategies and arguments [...] advanced in the language of protecting ‘human rights’, but generally seeking to reverse or undo previous human rights developments and commitments” (Gráinne de Búrca and Katharine Young 2023). These strategies have been deployed domestically, but also at the international level, harnessing the power of diplomacy or the government-organised NGOs (“GONGOs”). However, the concept can be used to describe more generally misuses of human rights seeking or at least ultimately leading to a decrease of human rights protection. In this context, misappropriation is not necessarily limited to authoritarian regimes as there is an ongoing debate about radicalization and potential abuse and misappropriation of human rights as well. Thus, in view of increasingly demanding human rights activists and scholars in “the West” and increasingly sceptical or even hostile regimes in other world regions, a threat of human rights implosion appears to be emerging.

The symposium aims to investigate and conceptualise the phenomenon of “misappropriation” of human rights in authoritarian regimes and liberal democracies. Drawing on perspectives from scholars, practitioners, and civil society, the symposium asks about the legal and non-legal strategies used to construct abusive human rights narratives, the relevant actors involved, the reasons for choosing misappropriation instead of outright rejection and the criteria to determine that human rights are misappropriated. In addition, the symposium addresses the consequences of misappropriation on the human rights regime, how human rights are perceived within societies, the consequences on scholarship and international relations, as well as the differences between misappropriation in authoritarian and liberal regimes and across generations.

The symposium is part of the Thematic week “Human rights in times of multiple challenges – perspectives from science and society”, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. It is organized by the Academy for European Human Rights Protection of University of Cologne, Germany, in collaboration with the Volkswagen Foundation. We seek to unite scholars and practitioners of multiple disciplines as well as stakeholders from civil society from all over the world. Participants will be discussing their different perspectives on misappropriation in various formats, including panel debates, paper presentations, focus groups, dialogues, and keynote speeches. This call primarily addresses early career researchers who will be given the opportunity to participate in the three-day symposium, together with other pre-invited participants. Preference will be given to scholars from the Global South.

Against this background, we look for position papers that reflect on the general nature and specific aspects of misappropriation of human rights, its various forms, causes, and consequences. Possible, but non-exhaustive questions to discuss might be:

- How are narratives constructed in human rights law, and what are their characteristics?
- Who is involved in the process of misappropriation?

- What are the legal strategies for constructing and pushing forward alternative human rights narratives? What role does language play? How can this phenomenon be fit into theoretical linguistic frameworks?
- What are the non-legal strategies of misappropriation? What role do government-organised NGOs play?
- What are the consequences of the political phenomenon of human rights backlash in the context of misappropriation?
- What can the human rights movement do to counter misappropriation?
- What are the consequences of misappropriation for the public perception of human rights?

We therefore invite early career researchers to submit an anonymized abstract in English (max. 450 words) by **14 August 2023** only via [this link](#). Abstracts will be considered via a blind review process. Selected candidates will be notified by 21 August 2023. Position papers (max. 3000 words, including footnotes) must be submitted by 29 October 2023. We envisage publishing extended versions of these contributions. The symposium is planned as an on-site event. The travel and accommodation costs of the selected participants will be covered. Further information will be available upon the acceptance of the abstract. More information will soon be available at <https://academy-humanrights.uni-koeln.de/en/news>.

If you have any questions, please contact humanrights-week@uni-koeln.de.

Organisers:

Dr. Júlia Miklasová

Dr. Paula Rhein-Fischer

Dr. Cathérine Van de Graaf



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