International Balzan Foundation

Press Release - 19 November 2026

2026 Balzan Prizes Awarded in Rome

In the presence of the President of Italian Republic

750,000 Swiss Francs (approx. €810,000, $910,000, GBP 680,000) for each award

Today, During the Awards Ceremony in Rome, this year's Balzan Prizes were presented to:

- **Elena Esposito** for The Social Science of Digital Technology,
- **Rasmus Nielsen and Ziheng Yang** for Molecular Evolution: Decoding Patterns of Genomic Change,
- **David Nirenberg** for Jewish Studies,
- **Geoffrey W. Coates and Marc A. Hillmyer** for Biodegradable Polymers from Renewable Sources,
- **Emergency Response Rooms** for Humanity, Peace and Fraternity among Peoples.

The Ceremony took place in the presence of the President of the Italian Republic Sergio Mattarella, in the majestic setting of the Quirinal Palace, where the Presidents of the International Balzan Foundation - Prize, Maria Cristina Messa, and - Fund, Gisèle Girgis-Musy, gave the official speeches, while each Prizewinner, presented by the Chair of the General Prize Committee, Marta Cartabia, gave a speech of acceptance and thanks.

According to established tradition reflecting the Italo-Swiss nature of the International Balzan Foundation, the Awards Ceremony takes place in alternate years in Rome, in the presence of the President of the Italian Republic, and in Bern, in the presence of a Representative of the Federal Council or of the National Council of the Swiss Confederation.

The International Balzan Foundation awarded 750,000 Swiss Francs (approx. (810,000 euros, 910,000 USD, 680,000 GBP) for each annual prize. The winners are each required to allocate half of their prize money to funding research projects carried out by young scholars or scientists in their respective fields.

The Balzan Prize for Humanity, Peace, and Fraternity among Peoples is a special prize awarded at intervals of no less than three years. This year's award is worth 750,000 Swiss francs.

The Ceremony is followed, on Friday 20 November, by the Balzan Prizewinners Interdisciplinary Forum, a public event dedicated to the Balzan Prize subject areas for the current year, with the Prizewinners playing the prominent role.

The International Balzan Foundation was established in 1957 to support culture, science, and the most meritorious humanitarian initiatives promoting peace and fraternity among peoples. At the request of the Foundation, nominations are submitted by academic and cultural institutions around the world. The winners of the Balzan Prizes allocate half of the prize money to research projects carried out by young scientists and scholars. The Balzan International Foundation operates through two institutional offices, one in Milan and one in Zurich. The Balzan - Prize Foundation in Milan, through its General Prize Committee composed of internationally renowned members from all over Europe, chooses the subjects for the awards and selects the candidates. The Balzan - Fund Foundation, based in Zurich, administers the estate left by Eugenio Balzan.

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The motivations for the 2026 Balzan Prizes

to Elena Esposito for The Social Science of Digital Technology

For her groundbreaking theoretical contribution to the social science of digital technology, and in particular for her concept of artificial communication, which reframes the question of artificial intelligence by showing that algorithms can participate in social exchange in the absence of understanding. For providing a rigorous and innovative framework that could transform social science engagement with artificial intelligence across every domain in which algorithmic systems are becoming active participants. For her sustained programme of empirical research applying these insights to algorithmic prediction in finance, medicine, and public policy.

to Rasmus Nielsen and Ziheng Yang for Molecular Evolution: Decoding Patterns of Genomic Change

For their pioneering and complementary contributions to molecular evolution, combining statistical theory, computational methods, and genomic analysis to reveal how natural selection shapes genes and populations, and for developing widely used tools that have transformed the study of evolutionary adaptation.

to David Nirenberg for Jewish Studies

For his ground-breaking scholarship and contributions on Judaism, anti-Judaism, and the dynamics of the relationship between Jews, Christians, and Muslims; for his meticulous research, theoretical insights on the fundamental interdependence of violence and tolerance, rigorous historical analyses, and command of a wide range of sources in multiple languages and spanning multiple disciplines; and for profoundly advancing our understanding of not only ancient, but also contemporary questions.

to Geoffrey W. Coates and Marc A. Hillmyer for Biodegradable Polymers from Renewable Sources

For their pioneering and collaborative development of sustainable polymers, combining molecular design and catalysis to transform renewable feedstocks and recovered carbon dioxide into high-performance, degradable and recyclable materials, and for advancing these discoveries from fundamental science to industrial materials and technologies.

The motivation for the Prize for Humanity, Peace and Fraternity among Peoples

to Emergency Response Rooms for Humanity, Peace, and Fraternity among Peoples

For the extraordinary role it has played in providing on-the-ground assistance, solidarity and hope to communities affected by the civil war in Sudan. Through an extensive network of Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) and Local Coordination Councils (LCCs) – born out of civic engagement and grassroots participation – the movement has been able to fill the void left by the collapse of institutions and the difficulties in accessing international aid. In particular, the Balzan Prize money will be used to strengthen activities related to mental health care, which are of the utmost importance in a context marked by violence, displacement and a severe humanitarian crisis.