

Academic Freedom for New Generations

Human Rights, Democracy and Responsibility

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HUMAN RIGHTS, DEMOCRACY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM FOR THE NEW GENERATION

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I

PART ONE

The erosion of academic freedom in Europe

A slow, quiet erosion

- | Academic freedom in most European states has been slowly eroding for **10 –15 years**.
- | The danger is not always dramatic:
depending on the context, erosion takes different forms and reaches different degrees.
- | However, erosion is always **gradual, cumulative and often invisible**.

<https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/academic-freedom-index?time=2025>

What is academic freedom?

The "onion model"

Core dimensions: the freedom to research, to teach and learn, and to speak as an expert and student inside and outside academia.

Conditions that make it possible: institutional autonomy, academic self-governance, decent working conditions, public funding, and academia's own responsibility to protect it.

Threats can target the core directly, or they can wear away the conditions around it.

The university sector's definition (EUA, 2025)

Academic freedom consists of four vital elements:

- the freedom to learn and teach
- the freedom to conduct research and to valorise research results
- the freedom to communicate the results of scientific and artistic work within and beyond the university

Closely linked to institutional autonomy: *"only in an autonomous and secure environment can students, teachers and researchers carry out their academic work free from undue external influence or restriction"*

Five sources of pressure

1. Political interference, along a spectrum

Direct: political control over appointments, university boards, budgets and accreditation

Indirect: reforms of governance, funding and working conditions that unintentionally narrow academic freedom

Structural: deliberate acts based on the threat of prosecution, bans on theories, topics or people, and whole disciplines labelled "non-academic" (e.g. gender studies removed from accreditation in Hungary, 2018)

Not every legal restriction is illegitimate; it becomes illegitimate when it is disproportionate or bans theories, subjects or people for political or ideological reasons.

2. Pressure from within academia: silencing of dissenting colleagues and students

3. Attacks by society: harassment and defamation amplified by social media

4. The private sector: funding dependence and lawsuits against critical academics

5. Security policies: new limits on international collaboration

Taken one at a time, no single threat looks like a crisis. Taken together, they affect a great many scholars and students.

Complexity: interference travels through routine systems

Most pressure is not censorship. It comes through appointments, boards, budgets, accreditation, contracts, metrics and research-security rules.

Rhetoric and legal reality drift apart. Autonomy is praised in policy, while detailed regulation and funding mechanisms narrow it

Chilling effect: scholars censor themselves before any decision is made, so the loss leaves no record and cannot be reviewed.

EUA (2025) reaches the same diagnosis: in Europe, infringements are "*frequently subtle and insidious*", taking the form of excessive regulation and interference, increasingly top-down funding instruments or the stifling of unpopular views on campuses.

We need to intervene at several levels at once: international, national, institutional and individual.

II

PART TWO

Academic freedom, democracy and human rights

Two erosions, one process

The erosion of academic freedom is part of wider democratic decline since the early 2010s: lower voter turnout, falling trust in democratic institutions and growing polarisation. **Trust in higher education is falling too.**

How strongly academic freedom is restricted depends on two factors: (i) **how much a regime relies on coercion**, and (ii) **how centralized its power is**

Mild

Liberal democracies

Anti-academic rhetoric and government inaction, e.g. leaving researchers unprotected against SLAPPs.

Moderate

Electoral democracies

The critical role of universities is repressed by softer means.

Strong

Electoral and closed autocracies

Academics seen as political are selectively coerced, up to open repression and full dependence of universities on the state.

Academic freedom as democratic infrastructure

It belongs alongside **judicial independence**, **media freedom** and **civic space**, because each keeps power open to scrutiny. When scholars are silenced, courts, parliaments, journalists and communities lose independent evidence.

Three democratic roles of academia

testing truth

claims

civic

education

watchdog

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European universities say the same (EUA, 2025, Principles 1–3):

- a core value that enables all university missions: education, research, innovation and culture
- it guarantees the independence and quality of the academic processes,
- it underpins universities' civic mission and role in societal debates, "including during times of conflict"

Ceran's warning : Academic freedom should not depend entirely on political goals:

- if it is protected only because it is useful for democracy, its protection becomes conditional
- academic freedom also protects the truth for its own sake, it is merely a political instrument

A human right that other rights depend on

Academic freedom is a right of **every person** who researches, teaches, learns or takes part in academic debate.

Yet no freestanding right in European law

- Under the **ECHR** it is protected only indirectly, mainly through Article 10 on freedom of expression.
- **Article 13 of the EU Charter** applies only within the scope of EU law (as in Commission v. Hungary, the "Lex CEU" case).
- Other standards (**CM/Rec(2012)7**, **UNESCO 1997**) are soft law.

III

PART THREE

New generations: students and current challenges

Students: central, yet marginal in the debate

Student academic freedom has two dimensions:

Individual

developing one's capabilities as an independent learner and critical thinker

Collective

belonging to the academic community as a full member

EUA (2025) extends academic freedom to students only *"when they are specifically engaged in teaching or research activities"*.

The draft Council of Europe Student Rights Charter (2026) takes the view that students are rights-holders and members of academic communities, whose participation strengthens institutional democracy, quality and trust

- it covers every student
- student rights are **universal and unconditional**

Structural vulnerability

| Students depend on grades, supervision and scholarships, and doctoral candidates are the most exposed.

Students in Belarus (Mazzero, 2026)

Authoritarian patterns built into everyday university life:

- institutional autonomy pre-empted
- conformity performed rather than debate encouraged
- students treated as less than adults
- only fragmented, informal spaces of freedom

The lesson for all of Europe: restrictions of academic freedom become normal long before any open crisis.

A hostile digital epistemic environment

It further complicates academic freedom for students, eroding it in four ways:

Epistemic confusion

Peer-reviewed findings, unreviewed claims and pseudoscience circulate in the same feeds. Students must decide whom to trust while their own views are still forming, which makes them epistemically vulnerable.

Risky topics

Polarisation, disinformation and organised "anti-science" movements turn climate, migration, gender and public health into politically charged topics. Students learn to avoid them in theses, seminars and public posts.

Exposure

A statement in class can be recorded, clipped, taken out of context and go viral. Online harassment, doxxing and transnational repression now reach students as well as professors.

Surveillance inside the university

Learning analytics, AI proctoring and algorithmic decisions on admission, assessment or grants make students feel watched, which discourages experimenting and dissent.

Result: self-censorship starts at the very beginning of the academic path.

Self-censorship and the campus climate

- | Not every internal conflict is a threat. Debate and disagreement are the core of academic culture.
- | Attempts to silence views seen as unacceptable are growing inside academia as well, without separating harassment from legitimate debate. The result on both sides is **self-censorship**, or people leaving academia
- | Pressure is not only external: leaders should manage conflicts between students and academics, academics and leadership, and within research communities, and critically assess their own role in them.

EUA (2025): *"academic freedom and free speech are not the same, and universities should accommodate both":* guarding evidence-based argument while leaving room for uncomfortable, controversial and even radical views.

The challenge is to teach students how to disagree respectfully, not how to keep quiet.

IV

PART FOUR

The challenges of active citizenship

Participation, voice and activism

Participation	Meaningful participation in governance at all levels as a legally protected right-
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Representation	The right to organise autonomously and to elect and be elected freely.
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Voice	Freedom of expression on campus, including on controversial questions.
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Activism	Peaceful assembly and protest are legitimate democratic practices.
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Inclusion	Socio-economic conditions are recognised as vital for participation.
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A university that restricts student voices is teaching passivity, but also acceptance of academic capture and autocracy.

Freedom and responsibility

Academic freedom is not a privilege. It carries obligations.

- EUA (2025): *"both a right and a responsibility held by individual academics and academic communities"*, not a professional privilege

Research integrity: academic freedom does not protect misconduct.

Intellectual humility: respect for evidence, openness to being wrong, respect for opponents.

Pluralism respected: exercising freedom should strengthen pluralistic democracy, tolerance and respect for the rights and freedoms of others.

Solidarity: standing with scholars and students at risk, in Europe and beyond.

A warning: Musk-style "free-speech absolutism" is freedom without responsibility. It produces censorship by chaos, where truth is drowned in noise, harassment and disinformation.

IV

PART FIVE

Conclusion: next steps

Legal and policy level

EU Framework of Reference for Academic Freedom, ERA Act (in preparation)

Two complementary Council of Europe instruments are on the table:

A Convention/Recommendation on Academic Freedom

The 2026 feasibility report is positive, with the aim to make academic freedom a binding/recommending right of everyone who researches, teaches or learns, students included

The Student Rights Charter

Draft Committee of Ministers recommendation, 2026. It would:

- set common minimum standards for all students in Europe, including academic freedom and the right to dissent without reprisal
- make meaningful student participation in governance a legally protected right
- establish national systems of student rights with clear information, complaints and redress within a reasonable time

Students should be included in every one of these mechanisms, not just consulted.

Inside the university

Laws are necessary but not sufficient.

University leadership should

- build a shared **institutional understanding of academic freedom**
- **ensure academic self-governance**: functional collegial bodies and meaningful participation of all university communities in decision-making:
- create **transparent processes**
- shield research and teaching from undue external pressure, and **protect members of the community from intimidation and reprisals**
- **diversify funding to avoid over-dependence on a single**

source

Sources: EUA (2025); EUA, ALLEA & Science Europe (2019)

Every member of the community, students included, should

- uphold **academic integrity, quality and responsibility**
- actively **encourage open and rigorous debate, including on complex and difficult topics**
- make a strong public case for why **academic freedom is a precondition for the university's public mission**

Building a culture of academic freedom

The EUA toolbox

Engaging the whole community, *"from the leadership level to the student body"*:

- **codes of conduct**, referenced in employment contracts and job descriptions
- a dedicated body or leadership member as a **focal point for academic freedom**
- **regular seminars with the whole community**, external partners and civil society
- mandatory, **recurring training on academic freedom and integrity for students and staff**
- **academic freedom and integrity in curricula and teacher training**

"The defence of academic freedom cannot be left to the academic community alone."

Villano Qiriazzi, Council of Europe

Academic freedom is a shared democratic responsibility of governments, institutions, civil society and students.
Each new generation has to learn and defend democracy again, and the university is where that begins.

Protecting academic freedom today means educating the active, critical and responsible citizens of tomorrow.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE CONFERENCE

Academic Freedom in Action 2026

25–26 November 2026

Palais de l'Europe, Strasbourg

Policymakers, academics, students, civil society and human rights institutions, moving from identifying challenges to practical responses.

DAY 1 · 25 NOVEMBER

09:30 Shared responsibility for democracy and the rule of law

11:15 **Beyond safe conversations: difficult contexts**
Chair: Ivan Šimonović

14:00 Democratic participation and contested knowledge

15:15 Building cooperation for more effective protection

16:45 Voices at risk: testimonies and solidarity

DAY 2 · 26 NOVEMBER

09:00 From monitoring to action

10:00 **Students and academic
freedom**

11:30 Global currents, shared struggles

Beyond Safe Conversations: Academic Freedom in Difficult Contexts

SESSION CHAIR

Ivan Šimonović

Director General, Inter-University Centre (IUC);
Professor, University of Zagreb

Co-organised with the IUC. How universities, scholars and networks cope with conflict, democratic backsliding and shrinking civic space, and what solidarity and institutional support can offer.

PANELLISTS

Astri Andresen

Professor, University of Bergen, Norway

Wieger Bakker

Deputy Director General, IUC; Professor, Utrecht University, Netherlands

Snježana Prijić Samaržija

Vice-Chair, IUC Council, Professor and former Rector, University of Rijeka, Croatia

Giga Zedania

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Rector, University of Belgrade, Serbia

THANK YOU

