

Academic freedom: ideals and reality - “practical ideals”

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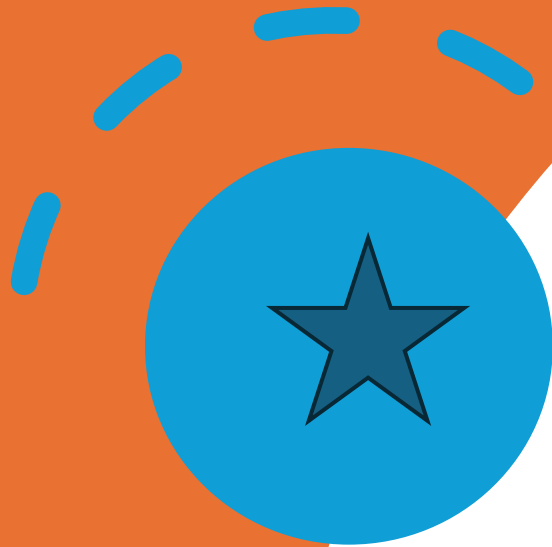
School of Education, Communication and Society

Global Observatory on Academic Freedom



GLOBAL OBSERVATORY
ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM





The centrality of academic freedom in
the current debates about higher
education, democracy,
the present and the future of society:



A RECENT PHENOMENON, AFTER 2017-2018

Questions to keep in mind
when discussing about
ideals and reality in
academic freedom



- Academic freedom – always central to the discussions about higher learning and research; but to democracy? Is this new?
- Is academic freedom a political notion or a “technical” higher education notion – precondition for the production, transmission, dissemination of knowledge ?
- Is academic freedom about conditions of work (not politics)? A professional set of freedoms and obligations?



- Prominence of the discussion about of academic freedom in and beyond higher education: due to recent changes in politics, ideology, geopolitics- **not primarily in AI, economy, pedagogy, or models of knowledge production.**
- If academic freedom a political matter – it might require a political solution?





Ideals and reality – what is this discussion about

- Not just knowledge production, transmission and dissemination; not just teaching (and learning) and research
- Competing projections (“ideals”) about democracy, society and about the role of higher learning and research in these.
- What are these ideals? How to promote them in practice on this terrain?



The crisis of academic freedom after 2007-2009

- Transcendental perspectives on ideals
 - A sociological and applied philosophical perspective on “ideals and reality”
- 



The crisis

Political, regulatory and also intellectual.

Changes in the dominant mix of policy narratives that used to be supportive of higher education and academic freedom:

- knowledge society, democratization, Europeanisation, even neoliberalism
- populism, illiberalism, democratic backsliding instead

Solution: charting a way out of the crisis:

- New conceptual reference points for academic freedom –but not only
 - New frameworks of reference for academic freedom altogether, to guide resistance, safeguarding academic freedom; work in higher education altogether
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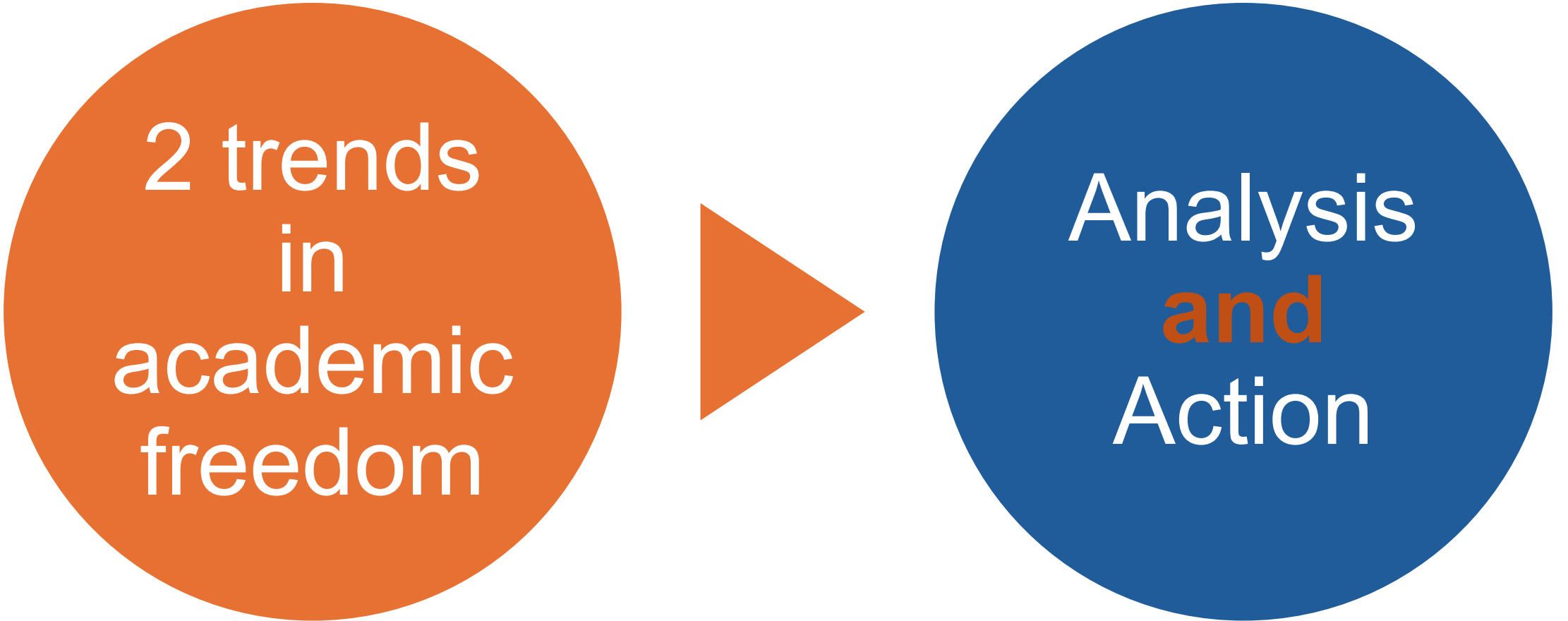


Addressing the crisis

- Reimagining academic freedom; but not just proposing a new ideal
 - A “new practical ideal”
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Crisis of academic freedom

2 trends
in
academic
freedom



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graph LR; A((2 trends in academic freedom)) --> B((Analysis and Action))
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Analysis
and
Action

1. Academic freedom under attack everywhere?

Academic Freedom Index

“50 countries and territories (..) have experienced a statistically and substantially significant decline in academic freedom compared to ten years ago, while only nine countries saw an increase in academic freedom”



*A more refined analysis needed,
applied to academic freedom; and
adapted action.*

*You cannot treat a disease with
a thermometer.*



2. Emergence of new frameworks of reference for academic freedom

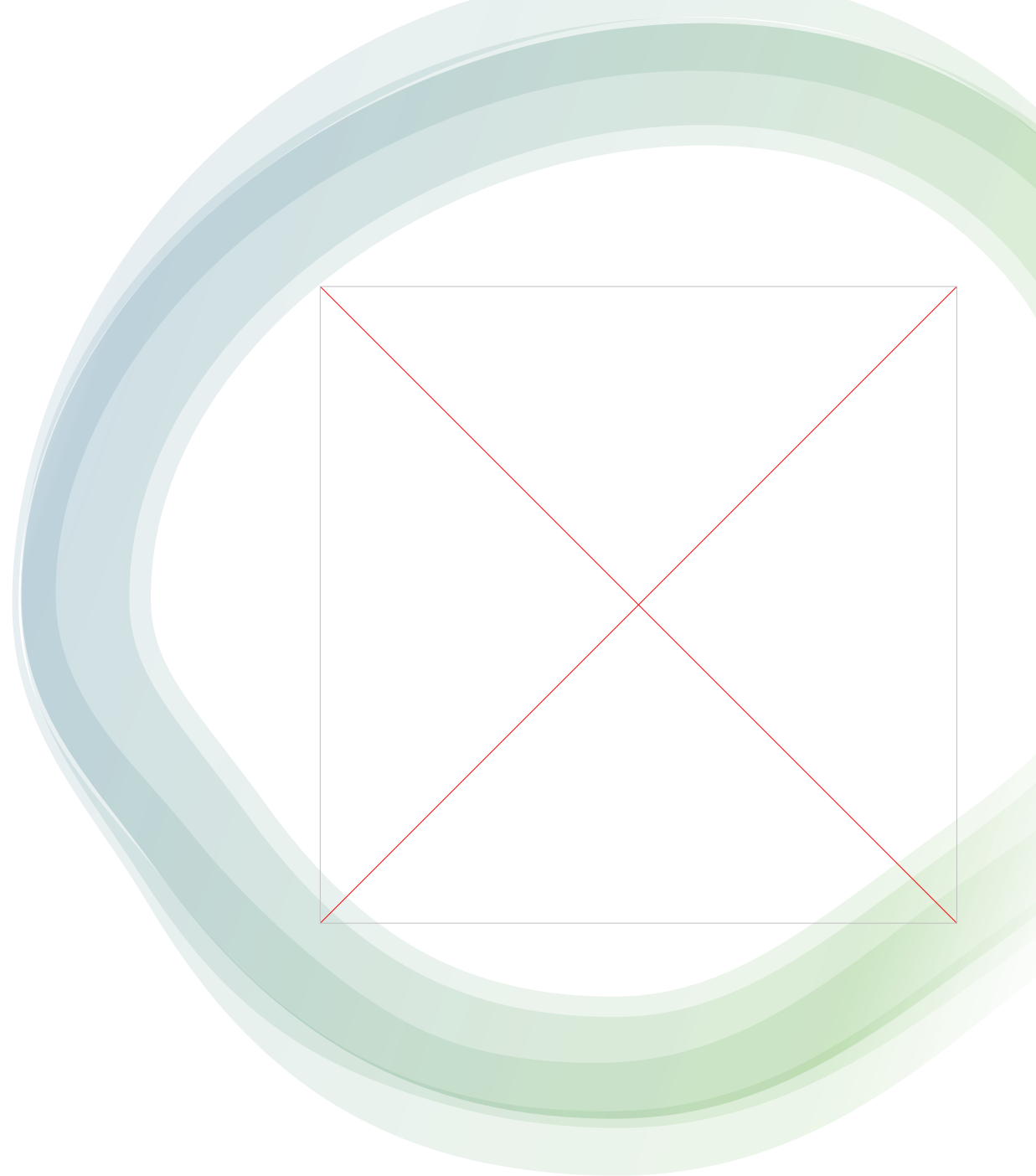
Supportive or not supportive (even repressive)

Examples:

Europe (++)

US (-)

Other parts of the world (+-)



Frameworks of reference as a heuristic tool

How “we” :

- know what academic freedom is, and
- How “we” decide to act upon academic freedom

Situated epistemology; sociology of knowledge.

“We”
position
ourselves
within
given
frameworks
of
reference

Example

EC vs Hungary, Court of Justice of the EU
2017-2020 (**national vs regional
frameworks**).



Frameworks of reference – constitutive elements

- A shared conceptual reference point (“anchor”) –e.g. [Rome Statement on Academic Freedom, 2020](#)
- Elements of codification (can be **legislative norms** - but not necessarily, regulations, codes of conduct, etc.).
- Guidelines for the practice and protection of academic freedom.
- Provisions about institutions and/or institutional mechanisms that should or could be utilised to implement the respective understanding and codification of academic freedom.
- Monitoring



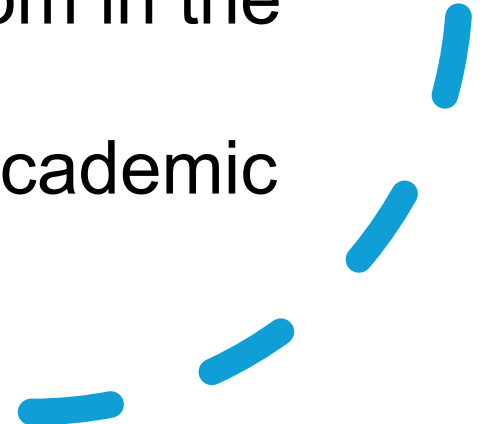


Recent global frameworks of reference: new “practical ideals”?

- Principles for implementing the right to academic freedom -(2024 –UN; SAR). Beyond the global human right ideal
- Revised **UNESCO recommendations** (ongoing) –the challenges of reality
- **Magna Charta Universitatum** (2020)- values as ideals

Regional –
equally
ideal but
unequally
practical?

- The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) fundamental values of higher education – maybe the most remarkable development?
- European Union - ERA Act (ongoing)
- EU Commission: Guiding Principles on fundamental academic values (2026)
- Africa Coalition for Academic Freedom (ACAF)
- Coalition for Academic Freedom in the Americas (CAFA)
- Southeast Asia Coalition for Academic Freedom (SEACAF)



The crisis of academic freedom

- analysis

- Absence of supportive frameworks of reference –with shared, up to date and effective elements (conceptual references, codification, monitoring etc.)
– e.g. CEU affair
- Replacement of supportive frameworks of reference with regressive/repressive ones (Hungary, US)

The crisis of academic freedom

- action

- Education and advocacy about existing effective frameworks of reference (**ideals and reality**).
- Create new/improve frameworks of reference (supportive). Projecting new ideals; articulating them in concrete frameworks of reference – **conceptual references but not only** (to make them practical)
- Address shifting policy narratives and other trends (including AI). **New, adapted practical ideals**
- Resist disbanding existing frameworks of reference

Thank you!

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