

ESU EUROPEAN
STUDENTS'
UNION





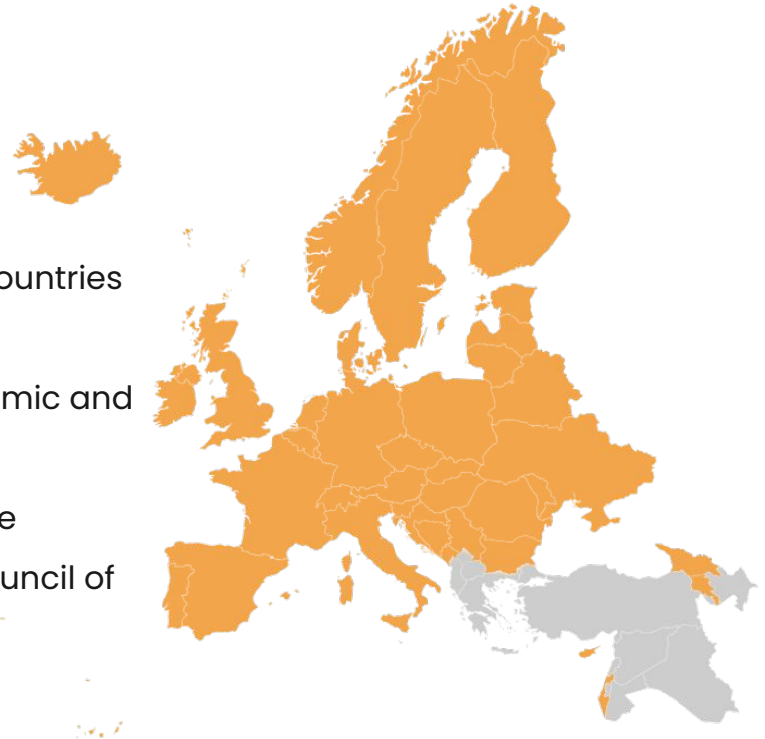
Academic freedom through the eyes of students

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President of the European Students' Union



What is ESU?

- Umbrella organisation
 - **43** National Unions of Students (NUS) from **40** countries
 - **20** million students across Europe
- ESU represents & promotes educational, social, economic and cultural interests
- We work with several European and global actors – the European Union, the Bologna Follow-Up Group, the Council of Europe and UNESCO



Academic freedom rests on three inseparable pillars:
the freedom

- to **learn**
- to **teach**
- to conduct **research**

**independently and without interference*

What does this mean?

- Students should be **equally** considered in discussions related to academic freedom - as it also means the freedom to learn
- Students are **rights-holders** within the academic community
- Students should be actively involved in the **protection** and **defense** of academic freedom

Frameworks for academic freedom

Example 1:

In the European Higher Education Area (EHEA):

- One of the 6 fundamental values
 - Academic freedom
 - Academic integrity
 - Institutional autonomy
 - Student and staff participation in higher education governance
 - Public responsibility for higher education
 - Public responsibility of higher education
- Statement on Academic Freedom (annex to the Rome Ministerial Communiqué)

Frameworks for academic freedom

Example 1:

“Academic freedom is an indispensable aspect of quality **learning**, teaching and research in higher education as well as of democracy.”

“It guarantees academics and **students** the freedom of thought and inquiry to advance knowledge through research and to exchange openly...”

Frameworks for academic freedom

Example 2:

In the United States of America:

- Related to first amendment right to “freedom of expression”
- Covered by case law
 - In *Keyishian v. Board of Regents*, 385 U.S. 589 (1967), the Supreme Court stated: “Teachers and **students** must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding...”

Frameworks for academic freedom

Example 2:

- However, the precise content of students' academic freedom remains uncertain and debated
- The American Association of University Professors (AAUP)'s 1915 Declaration recognizes that “academic freedom has traditionally had two applications—to the freedom of the teacher and to that of the **student**, *Lehrfreiheit* [to teach] and **Lernfreiheit** [to learn]”

Who can impact academic freedom?

Public authorities

- Laws and regulations
- Funding arrangements (earmarked vs. unrestricted)
- Overall political and institutional climate (democratic vs. authoritarian)

Institutional leadership

- Leadership style: inclusive and consultative vs. directive and micromanaging
- Funding and resource-allocation decisions
- Relations with academic colleagues
- Working/Learning environment and tolerance of dissenting or alternative views

Society at large and societal groups

- Tolerance of dissenting and alternative views
- Challenges to the legitimacy or credibility of academic research (e.g. populist attacks)
- Threats, harassment, or intimidation directed at academics (e.g. in relation to COVID-19 research)

What are we worried about?

- Lately, the European Students' Union has seen **(the erosion of) academic freedom** as one of the **top priorities** for National Unions of Students (together with the overall erosion of democracy)
- ESU has also analyzed the latest findings of the **EP Academic Freedom Monitor** and the data in the annual **Academic Freedom Index** (March, 2026)



What did we find out?

- Academic freedom is not collapsing overnight, but is **steadily eroding**
- EU members states that declined in the Academic Freedom Index:
 - 15 out of 27, over the past year
 - 24 out of 27, over the past 5 years
 - **25 out of 27**, over the past decade

Main challenges, from the perspective of students

- The commercialization and commodification of higher education
- Political pressure, the growth of polarisation and the overall erosion of democracies
- Anti-intellectualism and societal pressure
- Security policies and foreign interference
- Fundamental values of higher education placed at risk

Some of the measures students would like decision-makers to implement

- Establishing **legally binding protections** for students, staff, scholars and higher education institutions
- **Protecting** higher education from political interference and polarization
- **Addressing risks** stemming from commercialisation, commodification and private sector influence
- Recognizing and protecting **students at risk**, by, inter alia, expanding current frameworks to address the growing vulnerabilities of students across Europe;
- Recognizing students as **full rights-holders** of academic freedom and as key stakeholders in its protection

How do we monitor this?

- Whilst ESU found it challenging to monitor individual cases of breaches of academic freedom, we have created a tool to monitor cases that spark public outrage within the student body
- One year ago, we established the “Student Protest Monitoring”

What is the Student Protest Monitoring?

- **Purpose:** Track and document student protests and mobilisation across Europe
- **Context:** Student movements as a longstanding force for social and democratic change
- **Focus:** Protests concerning democracy, safety, justice, peace and higher education
- **Country profiles:** We have an interactive map with country-level data, trends and comparisons
- **Methodology:** Systematic monitoring of protests reported by NUSes or identified through news, media and social media
- **Aim:** Identify common themes, trends and developments in European student mobilisation

What is the Student Protest Monitoring?





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