



Academic Freedom Monitor 2025

Analysis of academic
freedom trends in
the EU

STUDY

Panel for the Future of Science and Technology



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Abstract

Academic freedom is widely recognised as a fundamental value of contemporary higher education and research, and as a prerequisite for well-functioning democratic societies. However, in recent years, major concerns have been expressed by various stakeholders about the state of academic freedom in the European Union. The European Parliament annual Academic Freedom Monitor aims to improve the promotion and protection of academic freedom in the EU. The 2025 edition is organised in two parts.

The first part consists of an update of existing measures of academic freedom in all EU Member States, an updated overview of public debate and studies of the state of academic freedom in four selected EU Member States, and an examination of the EU's state of academic freedom in a global context.

The second part contains a thematic analysis of the potential impact of selected trends in academic freedom within the EU, namely political polarisation, recent developments in the US higher education and research system, the commercialisation of academia, and foreign interference.

Furthermore, EU-level policy options are proposed for possible legislative and non-legislative initiatives to enhance the support for academic freedom in the EU Member States.

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Executive summary

Academic freedom is essential to the mission of higher education and research, to the fundamental principles of academia in Europe and elsewhere, and as a prerequisite for well-functioning democratic societies. This insight is based on the broad recognition that universities, colleges and other academic organisations, such as research institutes, are key institutions in our societies. As European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has pointed out, the European way of life relies heavily on research and innovation, higher education, and technology produced and disseminated by an academic community that must operate openly and freely.

Over the last 10 to 15 years, concerns have emerged about the erosion of academic freedom in the European Union Member States. These concerns are reflected in numerous public debates, media articles and studies on academic freedom, which point to the increasing number of threats and infringements on academic freedom, as measured by academic freedom indexes and monitors. This study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the main trends regarding de facto academic freedom in the EU Member States. To achieve this, the study does not use a narrow definition of academic freedom. Instead, the following core dimensions of academic freedom are identified: the freedom to conduct research, the freedom to teach, the freedom to study, and academic freedom of expression. The study also focuses on the preconditions for the effective exercise of academic freedom. These include institutional autonomy, academic self-governance, adequate working and financial conditions for the academic community, as well as the academic community's responsibility for safeguarding academic freedom.

The study provides an up-to-date overview of EU Member States' scores on the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) and other academic freedom measurements published in 2025. In addition, key developments in 2024 and 2025 regarding de facto academic freedom in four EU Member States – Belgium, Finland, Italy and Poland – were analysed through a qualitative analysis of various data, with input from stakeholder organisations and academic experts. The trend analyses for four countries focused on analysing the potential impact of the following possible sources of threats to academic freedom: a) political interference, b) institutional leadership and management, c) the academic community, d) societal actors, e) the private sector, and f) security policies and foreign interference.

Moreover, the study identified several trends that pose specific challenges to academic freedom in the EU. First, political polarisation has become more extreme in several EU Member States and has become one of the forces underlying democratic backsliding in the EU and threatening academic freedom. Political polarisation has also reached academia, with the danger of creating divides within academia that in turn might lead to attempts to silence dissenting voices, and result in undue self-censorship. A specific issue here concerns the challenges of a 'post-illiberal government'. Replacing a government with illiberal tendencies with a liberal democratic government can create a situation in which the liberal government encounters institutional pitfalls that are difficult to circumvent in the short term without resorting to the same methods that created them.

A second trend identified is the declining respect for academic freedom in the United States, which can be linked to the increasing political polarisation in the country. This situation has potential consequences not only for the American science system, but also for academia in the EU Member States. This includes discontinuation of public funding for research in areas that do not fit the current US administration's political agenda. In this, the US government seeks to control not only the research agendas of US institutions and academics, but also those of researchers elsewhere, as the Belgian and Finnish cases in this report demonstrate. For the EU, this means that everything possible must be done to prevent the negative consequences of developments in the US for academic freedom in the US. Moreover, the US government's decision to stop using soft power, for example through USAID, to promote democratic principles and build democratic institutions in low- and

middle-income countries worldwide creates opportunities for the EU to use its soft power capabilities to promote the role of academic freedom in its global scientific cooperation, for example with the African Union (AU) and African countries.

A third trend identified is the potential influence of the private sector on academic freedom in relation to academic-private sector collaboration as an aspect of the commercialisation of academia. The study analysed this influence from a legal perspective. Specifically, the study examined the aspects of academic freedom that may be affected, that is, the respective rights holders and duty bearers; the permissible limits to academic freedom and possible justifications for interference; and potential obligations for the government. This analysis shows that collaboration with the private sector can be beneficial for academia, but in some cases it can also lead to infringements on individual or institutional academic freedom. For example, the private sector can provide access to additional – and sometimes essential – research resources, but over-reliance on such collaborations (financial or otherwise) can leave research or education agendas, or institutional priorities, vulnerable to significant influence from private sector commercial interests. This dynamic illustrates that restrictions on academic freedom in such contexts are often subtle rather than direct, but their cumulative effect can lead to systemic threats or interference. The possibility of such threats or interference underscores the need for effective safeguards, including organisational and procedural measures.

A fourth trend concerns the potential impact of foreign interference on academic freedom. The study analysed foreign interference in academic freedom on the basis of empirical data on various institutions affiliated with the People's Republic of China. The analysis includes institutions such as the Confucius Institute, the Chinese Scholarship Council, and high-risk universities with close ties to the People's Liberation Army and security services. In addition, this thematic analysis provides an overview of international cooperation between higher education institutions in a number of EU Member States and entities from the People's Republic of China. The analysis concludes with a discussion of how certain EU Member States address the question of foreign interference in academic freedom. Key findings highlight Chinese agencies' attempts to undermine academic freedom in the EU, growing concerns about collaborations with high-risk universities, potential reliance on the Chinese Scholarship Council for PhD candidates, and, crucially, divergent policy approaches across EU Member States to manage these threats.

The findings confirm that the state of de facto academic freedom across the EU continues to erode. While systematic and structural infringements of academic freedom occur only in Hungary, various threats to academic freedom are identified and discussed in most other EU Member States. The most serious recent threats arise from political interference, political polarisation, the impact of security policies and foreign interference. In addition, concerns about potential threats to academic freedom made by institutional leaders and managers, the potential consequences of attacks on dissenting voices, as well as on ideas and opinions within the academic community, remain. Moreover, harassment by societal actors against academics, students and academic institutions has become a serious threat to academic freedom, as shown by several national surveys. Finally, while the increasing involvement of the private sector in academia is generally seen as positive, this involvement may require more transparent regulation and procedures, possibly at the European level.

Based on the findings of the 2025 study, it is argued that each of the policy options proposed in the 2024 Monitor remains potentially relevant and therefore deserves careful consideration by the European Parliament. These include setting up a European platform on academic freedom; integrating academic freedom more effectively and consistently into EU higher education, research, development and innovation programmes; and establishing a European clearinghouse for the meta-analysis of existing research, data and other forms of relevant information on the state of academic freedom. However, the four trends described above also require new approaches and measures. Therefore, three new policy options are identified in the 2025 study. These are strengthening

strategies and guidelines for responding to foreign interference and managing research security risks in international scientific collaborations; developing a European strategy to promote Europe as a core region for the exercise of academic freedom; and identifying adequate measures to counter the impact of political polarisation on academic freedom. For the further development and implementation of these policy options at the European, national and institutional level, it is crucial that the academic community remains actively involved in the work of the European Parliament Academic Freedom Monitor.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Relevance and purpose of the study

The European Union is strongly committed to putting research and innovation, higher education and technology at the heart of the European way of life.¹ For this ambition to be realised, a key priority is to ensure that the academic community can operate openly and freely. Consequently, academic freedom is the fundamental value and principle underlying this vision of the centrality of science in European societies. It is not only a necessary condition for attaining high quality and relevant education and research, and for developing new technologies at universities, colleges, and research institutes, but also a prerequisite for well-functioning democratic societies.

Yet over the past decade, threats have emerged to the traditionally positive state of academic freedom in the EU Member States. To better understand these threats and to be able to counter them with appropriate measures, the European Parliament launched its Academic Freedom Monitor in 2022, supported by annual studies conducted at the request of the Panel for the Future of Science and Technology (STOA) at the European Parliament. The establishment of the European Parliament Academic Freedom Monitor represents an important step in developing effective and insightful approaches to monitoring academic freedom trends in the EU. It provides relevant insights into emerging trends in academic freedom and the measures that can be taken at European, national and institutional levels to enhance the promotion and protection of academic freedom in the EU Member States. It complements the initiatives of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (DG RTD) on the protection of the freedom of scientific research in the European Research Area (ERA), the work of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) member states on fundamental values, and the work of the Council of Europe on the 'Democratic Mission of Higher Education'.²

The purpose of the 2025 European Parliament Academic Freedom Monitor is to provide an update of existing measurements of academic freedom in EU Member States; a detailed overview of the state of academic freedom in four selected EU Member States, namely Belgium, Finland, Italy and Poland; a reflection on the EU's state of academic freedom in a global context; and a discussion of recent trends affecting the EU's state of academic freedom, focusing on the potential impact of political polarisation, of recent trends in the US science system, of the commercialisation of academia and of foreign interference on academic freedom. Based on the findings, the report presents three new policy options for the European Parliament to consider.

1.2. Academic freedom and related concepts

Since there is no globally agreed upon academic or legal definition of academic freedom, the pilot studies conducted for the European Parliament Academic Freedom Monitor have identified key elements of academic freedom that allow for a comparative examination and discussion of the current state of academic freedom in the EU Member States.³ These elements are derived from the

¹ See, e.g. closing speech by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen at the 'Choose Europe for Science' event at La Sorbonne, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/speech_25_1130

² See: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/democratic-mission-of-higher-education>

³ See in particular Kováts and Rónay (2023, p. 12), who argued in their study for the European Parliament Academic Freedom Monitor that the central elements of academic freedom form different layers, comparable to an onion (see also Karran and Beiter, 2020, pp. 124-125, and Maassen et al., 2023).

academic literature and political reports.⁴ In this interpretation, a distinction is made between the essential dimensions of academic freedom and the conditions required for exercising academic freedom as optimally as possible, also referred to as supportive elements. The essential elements include the freedom to research, the freedom to teach, the freedom to study, and the freedom of academic expression. Freedom to research refers to the freedom of members of the academic community to develop and follow their own research agenda without undue political, administrative, religious, economic, social, cultural, or academic interference. Freedom to teach and study refers to the freedom of individual academics to develop and design courses and teaching agendas, and the freedom of individual students to choose and pursue their studies without undue internal or external interference or pressure. Freedom of academic expression refers to the freedom of the members of the academic community to express themselves within and outside their institution based on their area of academic expertise or field of study. The supportive elements include institutional autonomy and academic self-governance, as well as adequate labour agreements and financial conditions.

Of relevance for understanding the legal interpretation of academic freedom in Europe is the case law on academic freedom by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and the European Court of Justice (ECJ). As argued by Kovács (2025), both Courts have moved towards following the 'liberal science script' in their interpretation of academic freedom and its limitations. The liberal science script denotes how science and liberalism interact (Kovács and Spannagel, 2025, p. 16-17). It advocates for academic freedom as the individual professional freedom of those who engage in scientific activity, and for the autonomy of the university (and other academic institutions) as the place where scientific activities take place (Kovács, 2025, p. 141). This legal interpretation of the institutional setting of academic freedom is in line with Beaud's conception that the idea of the university is meaningless without academic freedom, while there is no other space in society outside the university (or other academic institutions) where academic freedom can be exercised in a meaningful way (Beaud, 2022, p. 213). Furthermore, from a liberal science script perspective there are legitimate limitations to academic freedom, for example, posed by certain ethical considerations or specific public interests (Kovács and Spannagel, 2025, p. 17).

Academic freedom and freedom of scientific research

While the study presented in this report is focused on the state of academic freedom in the EU, it is of relevance to discuss the distinction between academic freedom and scientific freedom, or freedom of scientific research. In Europe, these terms are sometimes used synonymously, while the freedom of scientific research is also interpreted as being part of academic freedom. In the 2020 Bonn Declaration, for example, academic freedom and institutional autonomy, together with reliable and stable institutional financing, are emphasised as necessary prerequisites for the freedom of scientific research. In the Rome Ministerial Communiqué (2020), the Ministers responsible for Higher Education express their commitment to strengthening cooperation with the European Research Area (ERA). They call on the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) to focus in this collaboration, among other things, on safeguarding academic and scientific freedom, without this distinction being explicitly elaborated in the main text of the Communiqué, nor in Annex I, which contains a Statement on Academic Freedom. Furthermore, in the European Parliament resolution of 17 January 2024 with recommendations to the Commission on the promotion of the freedom of scientific research in the EU, the freedom of scientific research is interpreted as an essential element of democracy and one of the constituent parts of academic freedom.

⁴ Of special relevance in this are the Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research, https://www.bmftr.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/EN/b/bonn_declaration_en.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=5 and the Rome Ministerial Communiqué of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), https://ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique_Annex_I.pdf

Given this variety of possible interpretations of the distinction between academic freedom and the freedom of scientific research in European higher education and research policy arenas, and given the ongoing work on the preparation of the ERA act, it is of relevance to further discuss the meaning of the freedom of scientific research in relation to academic freedom.

In his seminal work on academic freedom, Metzger (1978, p. 107) argues that academic freedom and scientific freedom have very different meanings within the US academic context. From his perspective, academic freedom is the freedom of a profession that encompasses all disciplines and covers all regular academic activities performed within the context of an academic appointment at a university or college, with all the associated 'common duties and anxieties that this entails' (Metzger, 1978, p. 107). Scientific freedom, on the other hand, is the freedom to hold a variety of professional positions in different institutional settings within a discipline, based on the scientific advancement of knowledge in specific areas. Metzger argues that therefore 'scientific freedom needs its own theoretical formulation of rights and limits, and its own machinery and procedures for detecting and reprovig an offense' (1978, p. 108). This theoretical formulation would focus, at least in the US context, on the relationship between science and society, and not, as with academic freedom, on the institutional context of academic activities, including teaching and studying. The essence of scientific freedom would then 'be revealed in a variety of transactions that find no convenient niches in the theory of academic freedom, for example, those between scientists and industrial employers, between scientists and governmental employers, between scientific enterprises and local interests, or between the scientific community and the patron state' (Metzger, 1978, p. 108).

Within a European context, Kovács and Spannagel (2025, p. 15) take a slightly different approach. They see freedom of science as an umbrella term encompassing the right to science and academic freedom. In their view, academic freedom is understood as a professional freedom of those engaged in scientific research and/or teaching in higher education and who are affiliated with a university, college or research institute. They believe that the right to science is a human right that applies to everyone. This includes 'the right to share in the benefits of scientific discoveries and the right to participate freely in scientific research' (Kovács and Spannagel, 2025, p. 15). Freedom of scientific research is the area where academic freedom and the right to science overlap. It encompasses the right to share scientific results with other academic researchers and the public. In this interpretation, institutional autonomy is not conceptually a direct part of academic freedom, but a functional condition for its protection (Kovács and Spannagel, 2025, pp. 15-16).⁵

These conceptualisations can be of relevance for developing a clearer distinction between academic freedom and the freedom of scientific research in Europe. Such a distinction could, for example, help to identify specific threats to students as well as to scientists who do not teach and are not employed by a university or college. Under EU law, Article 13 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (CFR) protects the 'Freedom of the Arts and Sciences'. The first sentence of this article states that 'scientific research shall be free of constraint' and the second sentence states that 'academic freedom shall be respected'. According to the case law of the European Court of Justice, academic freedom, as enshrined in the second sentence of Article 13 CFR, includes the 'freedom to conduct research'.⁶

⁵ For a graphical presentation of the interpretation of freedom of science as an umbrella term see: Figure 1. The freedom of science and its elements (in Kovács and Spannagel, 2025, p. 15).

⁶ See: *Commission v Hungary*, [C-66/18] [2020] ECLI:EU:C:2020:792, para. 225.

1.3. Recent trends and reading guide

Global and regional assessments of the state of academic freedom have shown that academic freedom is under increasing pressure in a growing number of countries.⁷ As discussed in European Parliament Academic Freedom Monitor reports published since 2022, the state of academic freedom is slowly eroding in most EU Member States. Recent academic freedom trends in the EU show traditional threats to academic freedom, especially through political interference, and new threats, such as attacks on academia from society and intensifying foreign interference efforts. This implies that threats to academic freedom in the EU are coming from different sources at the same time. While taken separately, each of these threats might not present a crisis, taken together they have a potentially far-reaching impact on the academic freedom of many scholars and students in Europe.

This report is structured along two objectives. The first is to provide a critical, updated synthesis of existing measurements of academic freedom in the EU, which builds upon new measurements and research results as well as on previous studies conducted for the European Parliament Academic Freedom Monitor. This implies that the updates will include possible new academic freedom trends and developments since 1 January 2024. Building on the updated synthesis and additional empirical data analyses, the report presents an analysis of the potential impact on academic freedom of four trends in the EU, political polarisation, recent trends in the US science system, the commercialisation of academia in relation to academic private-sector collaboration, and foreign interference, with a special focus on China. Based on the findings the report will present three new policy options.

⁷ See the 2025 Academic Freedom Index update (Kinzelbach, et al., 2025).

2. Methodology and resources used

2.1. Overview

The study's methodology builds on the methodologies used and further developed in the academic freedom studies conducted in the framework of the EP Academic Freedom Monitor since 2022 (Kováts and Rónay, 2023; Maassen et al., 2023; Craciun et al., 2024; Kosta and Ceran, 2025; Maassen et al. 2025).

The methodology of the synthesis of existing measurements included desk research for collecting the scores, measures, and case interpretations from the latest update of the Academic Freedom Index (Kinzelbach et al., 2025) and the latest Freedom in the World Report by Freedom House. To assist in interpreting changes in the Academic Freedom Index and its indicators, V-Dem's thematic comparison graphing tool (Varieties of Democracy, 2025) was used with the latest version of the V-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al., 2025) in order to identify substantially meaningful⁸ changes in each of the five AFI indicators for each EU Member State. If applicable, significant increases or decreases in the indicators over the past decade are presented along with the most recent scores. Where available, the quantitative scores were supplemented with reports from the Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, including SAR's latest Free to Think report. These data sources are presented and discussed in the next chapter (see Section 3.2).

Furthermore, in the first part of the study an updated overview of public debates, and relevant studies and reports of the state of academic freedom is conducted in four selected EU Member States⁹, – Belgium, Finland, Italy, and Poland – located in Western, Northern, Southern and Central/Eastern European regions respectively. The four country studies were conducted as desk research with national expert input (as in previous editions of the EP Academic Freedom Monitor), while the methodology of the 2025 study also included 2–4 interviews with stakeholders and national experts in the selected countries, as well as a validation of the findings by members of the project's Sounding Board. The interviewees were selected based on their expertise in the field of academic freedom, or their active participation in national discussions and/or developments in the field of academic freedom, such as legislative changes. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes. For each interview, a series of questions was developed that were specific to the country in question. These questions served as a guide for the interview. This guide addressed questions related to the six potential threats to academic freedom for all four selected countries (see section 3.5.3). Although a strategy was developed to address disagreements among interviewees, there appeared to be no disagreements among interviewees on the academic trends in each of the four countries by country. The interviewees received a draft version of the report for their country, and their feedback was incorporated into the final versions of the country reports. A description of the methodology used in producing the updated synthesis and the four country studies is presented in Annex 1.

In addition, the study provides insights into the EU's state of academic freedom in a global context. For this, the quantitative scores from the AFI (Kinzelbach et al., 2025) are used to explore how the

⁸ The interpretation of 'substantially meaningful' in this report is explained in section 3.2.

⁹ The 2022 pilot study for the EP Academic Freedom Monitor (Maassen et al., 2023) produced country-specific analyses for all EU Member States. The 2023 and 2024 studies (Craciun et al., 2024; Maassen et al., 2025) presented updates to these initial analyses for 20 EU Member States. The 2025 study updated the 2022 reports on Belgium and Finland. The update on recent trends in academic freedom for the remaining five EU Member States is scheduled for 2026. Furthermore, Italy and Poland were selected for the 2025 study due to recent government changes that may impact academic freedom. This impact could not be adequately analysed in the 2023 (Poland) and 2024 (Italy) updates prepared for these countries. For additional information on the selection process, see Annex 1.

EU's state of academic freedom compares to the state of academic freedom in non-EU Member State European countries, and third countries outside Europe.

The analysis of the potential impact on academic freedom in the EU Member States of political polarisation and of recent developments in higher education and research policies in the US is based on desk research and interviews.

The method employed in the study of the commercialisation of academia is the legal doctrinal method, understood as 'a systematic exposition of the principles rules and concepts governing a particular legal field or institution and analyses [of] the relationship between these principles, rules and concepts with a view to solving unclarities and gaps in the existing law' (Smits, 2017).

The study on foreign interference and academic freedom is structured into three main segments. The first explores the conceptual differences between foreign interference and foreign influence, drawing on a text-based analysis of existing academic literature. The second focuses on a case study examining the possible impact of academic freedom of certain actions of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a potential threat to higher education institutions and academic freedom in Europe. This analysis relies on academic articles, official reports concerning the PRC, news sources, targeted keyword web searches, and qualitative data from two specialised databases: the 'China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker' and the 'China Defence Universities Tracker'. To enrich this section, several expert interviews were conducted across selected case study countries concerning Confucius Institutes and PRC-related interference. Finally national responses and public policies in the selected case study countries are investigated. This is based on a combination of academic bibliography, available policy documents, and web searches. Where data on public policy were unavailable, the study supplemented this with expert interviews.

3. Updated overview of state of academic freedom in EU Member States

3.1. Introduction

The EP Academic Freedom Monitor 2025 aims at contributing to a better understanding of current and emerging threats to academic freedom in the EU Member States, and ways in which the protection and promotion of academic freedom can be strengthened in the EU and beyond. It builds on the previous studies commissioned by the European Parliament in the framework of the EP Academic Freedom Monitor¹⁰.

The first part of the report consists of a systematic update of data on the state of academic freedom in the 27 EU Member States from regularly updated academic freedom monitors since the previous study commissioned by the STOA Panel. The focus is on new data and scores from the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) as the most prominent and relevant monitor of academic freedom trends.

Section 3.2 provides an overview of the data sources for the study.

Section 3.3 provides a synthesis of existing measurements of academic freedom in the 27 EU Member States. In this section country fact sheets for each EU Member State are presented that synthesise existing measurements of academic freedom in the respective country.

Section 3.4 builds on the findings presented in section 3.2 and identifies the major recurring challenges to academic freedom in the EU Member States. The trends analysis maps out the groups of countries who witness specific threats related to the various dimensions of academic freedom identified and addressed in the AFI. The analysis also highlights those countries who score high on academic freedom measurements so that peer learning can occur. The identified trends were discussed with a group of experts on academic freedom in an online consultation.

3.2. Data sources

The 27 country overviews present the most recent scores and findings for each EU Member State from the Academic Freedom Index (AFI), the latest report from the Freedom House, and the 2025 Academic Freedom Monitoring Project report produced by Scholars at Risk. They update the synthesis presented in the EP Academic Freedom Monitor 2024 report (Maassen et al., 2025, pp. 6–47). This updated synthesis is based on measurements, indexes, and relevant reports published in 2025. Therefore, for example, we have not included data from the EUA Autonomy Scorecard in this year's report. The EUA Autonomy Scorecard is updated every six years, with the most recent update published in 2023 (Pruvot et al., 2023). Data from the 2023 EUA Scorecard were included in the 2023 EP Academic Freedom Monitor report (Maassen et al., 2023). The next update is expected in 2029.

Each individual data source in this part of the report has its own strengths and limitations in terms of factors such as geographical coverage, regularity of reporting, type of data used, contextual specificity, breadth and depth in covering all the elements of academic freedom, and consideration for how they apply to different members of the academic community. Since the EP Academic Freedom Monitor study by Kováts and Rónay (2023) provides an extensive discussion of efforts to assess or monitor academic freedom, we do not engage in an extensive analysis of monitoring methodologies here. Instead, we briefly describe each of the sources used.

¹⁰ Kosta and Ceran, 2025; Maassen et al., 2025; Craciun et al., 2024; Kováts and Rónay, 2023; Maassen et al., 2023).

Academic Freedom Index (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg and V-Dem Institute)

The Academic Freedom Index (AFI) is a recurring global index that assesses levels of academic freedom based on yearly expert assessments. The AFI is based on time-series data collected through the V-Dem Project. V-Dem provides up-to-date multidimensional and disaggregated measurements on various democracy dimensions in 179 countries and territories around the world based on the assessments of more than 4200 country experts¹¹. Some of the data collected to assess the health of democracies is related to academic freedom. Five V-Dem indicators are used by AFI to provide a global comparison on how countries are faring in terms of academic freedom: freedom to research and teach, freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, institutional autonomy, campus integrity, and freedom of academic and cultural expression. These indicators are coded by country experts on a scale of 0-4 per country and per year, starting in 1900, and then aggregated into an index with a value between 0 and 1 (Spannagel and Kinzelbach, 2023). The dataset used for the current report is V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c). It is important to note that, while the experts involved each year assess the state of academic freedom in their country of expertise for that year, they also had the opportunity to adjust previous years' assessments based on new insights and knowledge. This can lead to small differences in scores between the AFI updates. For example, the score for a specific country for 2021 in the AFI 2024 update might be slightly lower or higher than the score for that country presented in the original AFI report on 2021. The general score for academic freedom in the AFI is an index that ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 constitutes no respect of academic freedom and 1 constitutes full respect of academic freedom in the country. The scores for the individual categories of the AFI range from 0 to 4, with 0 representing the lowest score and 4 the highest.

Given the qualitative and retrospective nature of the data used for the AFI reports, a number of considerations should be taken into account when interpreting the data. The authors caution against direct comparisons and rankings of countries or time points, as this produces scores with overlapping confidence intervals. However, countries can be classified into quintiles based on their absolute AFI score, which V-Dem translates to 'status groups'.

The V-Dem codebook contains multiple versions of each indicator, each serving a different analytical and interpretive purpose. To achieve the aim of this study, which is to provide a general overview for content interpretation (rather than statistical analysis), the Linearised Original Scale Posterior Prediction version, with the suffix '_osp', is used in the AFI score tables below (Coppedge et al., 2025a, pp. 31-32; Coppedge et al., 2025b, pp. 26-27; Marquardt, 2025). While it does not necessarily allow for a statistical comparison of each of the indicators (for which other versions of the indicators could be used), it does provide a clearer substantive interpretation of the underlying categories that the 0-4 scale represents for each of the (sub-)indicators.

The AFI reports and V-Dem analytical tools regularly refer to 'substantially meaningful' changes in individual indicators over time. This describes an absolute change in the numerical score of an indicator which is likely to reflect an observable change in an indicator: for the main AFI score, this is represented by a change of ± 0.1 or more over any period (Kinzelbach et al., 2025, pp. 1-3). For the individual indicators, this is represented by a change of ± 0.5 or more over any period¹². This must not be confused with 'statistically significant' changes, understood as changes in scores where the confidence intervals of the two measurements no longer overlap. This combines notions of statistical reliability of the measurements, as well as substantially meaningful shifts in academic freedom.

¹¹ See the methodology for AFI 2025: https://v-dem.net/documents/61/v-dem-dr__2025_lowres_v2.pdf, p. 49.

¹² While not explicitly stated in AFI reports or the methodology, V-Dem uses a change of ± 0.5 or more to highlight substantially meaningful changes in individual indicators in their graphing tools. For instance, see V-Dem's regional comparison and thematic comparison tools: <https://v-dem.net/graphing/graphing-tools/>

Statistical significance is only consistently applied at the index-level and not at the indicator-level in the AFI reports (Kinzelbach et al., 2024; Kinzelbach et al., 2025).

The country overviews (section 3.3) present the most recent AFI and individual indicator scores, as well as scores from one, five and ten years ago. Based on the documentation provided by V-Dem, including a description of their methodologies and recommendations for interpretation, the country overviews highlight all scores that are substantially meaningful and/or statistically significant.

Finally, it is relevant to point out that the five AFI indicators do not systematically encompass all the dimensions and conditions of academic freedom identified in this study. For example, students' academic freedom, including the freedom to study, is not adequately covered by the five indicators, nor are working and financial conditions for the academic community.

Freedom in the World Report (Freedom House)

The Freedom in the World Report (Freedom House, 2025a) is an annual global comparative overview of political rights and civil liberties, featuring both quantitative indicators and descriptive analyses. Each country's assessment is conducted by external analysts using 'a combination of on-the-ground research, consultations with local contacts, and information from news articles, non-governmental organisations, governments, and various other sources' (Freedom House, 2025a) and is reviewed for validation by expert consultants and regional specialists. Freedom House has been conducting this assessment for 50 years.

The scores presented in the country studies of the 2025 report were collected specifically in response to the question, 'Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?'. This assessment was based on five additional sub-questions (Freedom House, 2025b):

1. Are teachers and professors at both public and private institutions free to pursue academic activities of a political and quasi-political nature without fear of physical violence or intimidation by state or nonstate actors?
2. Does the government pressure, strongly influence, or control the content of school curriculums for political purposes?
3. Is the allocation of funding for public educational institutions free from political manipulation?
4. Are student associations that address issues of a political nature allowed to function freely?
5. Does the government, including through school administration or other officials, pressure students and/or teachers to support certain political figures or agendas, including by requiring them to attend political rallies or vote for certain candidates? Conversely, does the government, including through school administration or other officials, discourage or forbid students and/or teachers from supporting certain candidates and parties?

The country reports provided by Freedom House have for this year been abridged due to ongoing budget constraints following changes in United States' foreign aid policy earlier this year (Freedom House, 2025b). Nevertheless, the country reports and their scores measuring academic freedom have been updated for 2025 and will be included. While most of the Freedom house country reports only present the score, the reports for Poland and Hungary include explanations elaborating on their respective scores. Slovakia is the only remaining country with a brief explanation; however, this is limited to a single sentence. These explanations are included in the country overviews in section 3.3.

Academic Freedom Monitoring Project (Scholars at Risk)

The Academic Freedom Monitoring Project (Scholars at Risk, 2025a) investigates and reports attacks on higher education with the aim of raising awareness, generating advocacy, and increasing protection for scholars, students, and academic communities. SAR's Monitoring Project defines attacks on higher education as including, 'threats or deliberate use of violent or coercive force or restrictions against higher education institutions and their affiliates, including leadership, administrators, academic and other staff, and students. These attacks include intentional acts resulting in wrongful death, physical harm, loss of liberty, limitations on academic travel, loss of professional or academic standing, or the destruction, damage, closure, or seizure of higher education institutions, facilities, or equipment. This definition also includes deliberate acts of coercion, intimidation, or threats of harm that undermine institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and educational functions. It does not generally include other infringements of these values and functions that lack these violent, coercive, or restrictive dimensions' (Scholars at Risk, 2025b)¹³. The Monitoring Project reports incidents involving six types of conduct:

1. Killings/Violence/Disappearances
2. Wrongful Imprisonment
3. Wrongful Prosecution
4. Travel Restrictions
5. Loss of Position
6. Other Incidents

The 2025 Freedom to Think database and report were searched for incidents that affected academic freedom in EU Member States between 1 July 2024 and 30 June 2025 (Scholars at Risk, 2025a; 2025b, Appendix 2). Because the types of cases recorded by Scholars at Risk do not represent the most significant threats to academic freedom in EU Member States, the use of data from this source is limited. nevertheless, the events data collected from this source provide a qualitative picture of the worrying developments in academic freedom in EU Member States during the recorded period, particularly in relation to students and staff protests concerning the Gaza-Israel conflict. The data provided also raise concerns about the restriction of academic activities by higher education institutions and political forces. The aim was to identify recurring threats so that relevant policy options could be developed.

3.3. Country data overviews

3.3.1. Updated 2025 scores and findings

In this section, we present updated overviews of country scores from the latest editions of the Academic Freedom Index (Coppedge et al., 2025; Kinzelbach et al., 2025; Spannagel and Kinzelbach, 2022), the Freedom in the World Report (Freedom House, 2025a), and cases presented in the Scholars at Risk's Academic Freedom Monitoring Project (SAR Scholars at Risk, 2025a; 2025b) involving EU Member States. Descriptions of these data sources can be found in section 3.2. In table 1 an overview is presented of the main scores and cases of the three monitors before moving on to the individual country reports.

¹³ See 'Methodology' chapter of the report (Scholars at Risk, 2025b).

Legend:

- ▼ Substantially meaningful decrease in a AFI score (at least -0.1) or indicator (at least -0.5)
- ▲ Substantially meaningful increase in a AFI score (at least +0.1) or indicator (at least +0.5)
- ◆ Statistically significant change in the AFI main score or indicator over the last ten years

Table 1 – Overview of academic freedom monitor findings by country

Country	AFI – score 2024	Freedom in the World academic freedom score	Number of cases identified by SAR
Austria	0.90	4/4	No cases
Belgium	0.94	4/4	No cases
Bulgaria	0.83	3/4	No cases
Croatia	0.83	3/4	No cases
Cyprus	0.89	3/4	No cases
Czechia	0.98	4/4	No cases
Denmark	0.89	4/4	No cases
Estonia	0.98	4/4	No cases
Finland	0.83	4/4	No cases
France	0.87	4/4	Three cases
Germany	0.88	4/4	Three cases
Greece	0.65	4/4	Four cases
Hungary	0.30	2/4	No cases
Ireland	0.92	4/4	No cases
Italy	0.89	4/4	Two cases
Latvia	0.92	3/4	No cases
Lithuania	0.81	4/4	No cases
Luxembourg	0.89	4/4	No cases
Malta	0.87	4/4	No cases
Netherlands	0.76	4/4	No cases

Poland	0.87	3/4	No cases
Portugal	0.72	4/4	No cases
Romania	0.83	3/4	No cases
Slovakia	0.88	4/4	No cases
Slovenia	0.93	4/4	No cases
Spain	0.88	4/4	No cases
Sweden	0.94	4/4	No cases

Source: Freedom in the World 2013–2025 Raw Data (Freedom House, 2025c), V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c), Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project (Scholars at Risk, 2025a), and Free to Think Report 2025 (Scholars at Risk, 2025b, Appendix 2).

3.3.2. Austria

Table 2 – Austria: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Austria	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.90	±0	-0.07	-0.08 ◆
Freedom to research and teach	3.44	±0	-0.44	-0.44
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.55	±0	-0.37	-0.37
Institutional autonomy	3.10	±0	-0.51 ▼	-0.51 ▼◆
Campus integrity	3.52	±0	-0.10	-0.35
Academic and cultural expression	3.74	±0	±0	±0

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

Austria is among the top 10% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). At the same time, Austria is marked red in the AFI 2025 update, indicating that the AFI score for Austria has had a statistically significant decline over the past decade (-0.08). It is noted by the authors that while the decline is statistically significant, it is not substantially meaningful for the level of academic freedom in Austria over the past decade¹⁴. Of the indicators, 'institutional autonomy' shows a substantially meaningful and statistically significant decline between 2014 and 2024 (-0.51) (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

¹⁴ This is defined as an increase or decrease equal to or greater than 0.1 on the Academic Freedom Index over 10 years (Kinzelbach et al., 2025, pp. 1-3).

The score for Austria on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.3. Belgium

Table 3 – Belgium: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Belgium	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.94	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03
Freedom to research and teach	3.47	-0.35	-0.35	-0.35
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.80	-0.11	-0.03	-0.03
Institutional autonomy	3.62	±0	±0	±0
Campus integrity	3.38	-0.27	-0.46	-0.46
Academic and cultural expression	3.79	±0	-0.10	-0.10

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c)

Belgium is among the top 10% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). Belgium's overall AFI index score has remained stable over the past decade with only slight declines in the scores for the individual indicators 'freedom to research and teach' (-0.35) and 'campus integrity' (-0.46) (Coppedge et al., 2025c). However, these changes are not regarded as substantially meaningful or statistically significant.

The score for Belgium on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.4. Bulgaria

Table 4 – Bulgaria: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Bulgaria	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.83	-0.01	-0.07	-0.08
Freedom to research and teach	3.32	+0.11	-0.25	-0.25
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.20	-0.06	-0.46	-0.50 ▼
Institutional autonomy	2.90	-0.16	-0.53 ▼	-0.53 ▼◆

Campus integrity	3.53	+0.17	+0.03	±0
Academic and cultural expression	3.14	-0.48	+0.09	-0.19

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

Bulgaria is among the top 20–30% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). The recent AFI index score for Bulgaria is generally stable, with no statistically significant changes over the previous ten years. Of the individual indicators, 'institutional autonomy' shows a substantially meaningful and statistically significant decline between 2014 and 2024 (–0.53), while 'academic exchange and dissemination' shows a substantially meaningful, but not statistically significant, decline between 2014 and 2024 (–0.50) (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

The score for Bulgaria on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 3 (Freedom House, 2025a), while the score in the previous four years was 4. According to the 2025 report 'The score declined from 4 to 3 because a new law effectively banned discussion of LGBT+ issues in schools, and teachers faced intimidation for voicing opposition to the law'¹⁵ (Freedom House, 2025a).

3.3.5. Croatia

Table 5 – Croatia: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Croatia	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.83	+0.03	-0.03	-0.04
Freedom to research and teach	3.08	+0.14	-0.19	-0.19
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.54	+0.19	+0.17	+0.22
Institutional autonomy	2.74	±0	-0.43	-0.58 ▼
Campus integrity	3.60	±0	-0.07	-0.07
Academic and cultural expression	2.82	±0	+0.04	-0.31

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

Croatia is among the top 20–30% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). Croatia's overall AFI index score has remained stable over the past decade. Of the individual indicators, 'institutional autonomy' shows a substantially meaningful, but not statistically significant, decline between 2014 and 2024 (–0.58) (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

¹⁵ This comment does not refer to an academic freedom threat in higher education, but a change in the primary/secondary schools in Bulgaria.

The score for Croatia on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in the World report is 3, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.6. Cyprus

Table 6 – Cyprus: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Cyprus	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.89	-0.04	-0.06	-0.06
Freedom to research and teach	3.67	-0.12	-0.19	-0.19
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.59	-0.20	-0.20	-0.20
Institutional autonomy	2.93	-0.20	-0.82 ▼	-0.82 ▼◆
Campus integrity	3.45	-0.07	+0.03	+0.03
Academic and cultural expression	3.28	-0.08	-0.15	-0.29

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

Cyprus is among the top 10–20% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). Cyprus' overall AFI index score has remained stable over the past decade. Of the individual indicators, 'institutional autonomy' shows a substantially meaningful and statistically significant decline between 2014 and 2024 (-0.82) (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

The score for Cyprus on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 3, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.7. Czechia

Table 7 – Czechia: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Czechia	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.98	±0	+0.04	+0.04
Freedom to research and teach	3.90	+0.04	+0.22	+0.22
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.91	±0	+0.23	+0.23
Institutional autonomy	3.67	-0.06	+0.11	+0.11

Campus integrity	3.90	±0	+0.20	+0.20
Academic and cultural expression	3.84	+0.12	+0.31	+0.18

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

Czechia is among the top 10% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). The index and indicator scores for Czechia are stable, with no substantially meaningful or statistically significant changes over the past decade.

The score for Czechia on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.8. Denmark

Table 8 – Denmark: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Denmark	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.89	-0.01	-0.06	-0.06
Freedom to research and teach	3.58	±0	±0	±0
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.44	-0.19	-0.47	-0.47
Institutional autonomy	2.80	±0	+0.02	+0.02
Campus integrity	3.53	±0	-0.37	-0.37
Academic and cultural expression	3.73	±0	±0	-0.21

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

Denmark is among the top 10–20% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). Denmark's overall AFI index score has remained stable over the past decade with only slight declines in the scores for the individual indicators 'academic exchange and dissemination' (-0.47) and 'campus integrity' (-0.37) (Coppedge et al., 2025c). However, these changes are not regarded as substantially meaningful or statistically significant.

The score for Denmark on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.9. Estonia

Table 9 – Estonia: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Estonia	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.98	0.01	0.01	±0
Freedom to research and teach	3.87	±0	+0.07	+0.03
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.83	±0	-0.06	-0.06
Institutional autonomy	3.70	+0.32	+0.09	+0.09
Campus integrity	3.94	±0	±0	±0
Academic and cultural expression	3.80	±0	+0.28	+0.02

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

Estonia is among the top 10% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). The index and indicator scores for Estonia are stable, with no substantially meaningful or statistically significant changes over the past decade

The score for Estonia on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.10. Finland

Table 10. Finland: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Finland	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.83	-0.10 ▼	-0.10 ▼	-0.11 ▼◆
Freedom to research and teach	3.17	-0.33	-0.37	-0.37
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.37	-0.29	-0.46	-0.46
Institutional autonomy	2.51	-0.46	-0.28	-0.28
Campus integrity	3.57	-0.32	-0.32	-0.32
Academic and cultural expression	3.45	-0.37	-0.11	-0.40

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

Finland is among the top 20–30% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). Finland is marked red in the AFI 2025 update, indicating that the AFI score for Finland has had a substantially meaningful and statistically significant decline over the past decade (-0.11). At the same time, while all five indicator scores have declined over the past decade (see table 10), the changes are neither substantially meaningful nor statistically significant (Coppedge et al., 2025).

The score for Finland on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.11. France

Table 11 – France: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

France	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.87	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03
Freedom to research and teach	3.27	-0.34	-0.34	-0.34
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.49	±0	-0.05	-0.05
Institutional autonomy	2.64	±0	±0	±0
Campus integrity	3.42	±0	±0	±0
Academic and cultural expression	3.85	±0	±0	±0

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

France is among the top 10–20% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach, et al., 2025). France's overall AFI index score has remained stable over the past decade, with only a slight deterioration in the area of 'freedom to conduct research and teach' (-0.34) (Coppedge et al., 2025c). However, this change is not regarded as substantially meaningful or statistically significant.

The score for France on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

The Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project reports three cases of attacks on higher education in the period July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025, in France.

The first report refers to a case where administrators of the Paris Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po) denied the use of a lecture hall for an event with Rima Hassan, a French Palestinian member of France's Parliament who is affiliated with the La France Insoumise (LFI) party, on the basis that it risked 'disturbing public order' (SAR, 2025)¹⁶. Scholars at Risk indicates that it is

¹⁶ See: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2024-11-20-paris-institute-of-political-studies/>

concerned about an attempt by higher education authorities to limit the right to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly on campus by denying a student group the space for a previously approved event.

The second report refers to a clash between a far-left, anti-fascist student group, and members of the Union Nationale Interuniversitaire (UNI), a right-wing student group, at University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès' Mirail campus (SAR, 2025)¹⁷. At least three students were injured. Scholars at Risk indicates that it is concerned about violent attacks by students against other students.

The third report refers to a case where French police used tear gas to disperse around 60 students protesting at the University of Lille's Pont-de-Bois campus against governmental budget cuts to public universities (SAR, 2025)¹⁸. Scholars at Risk indicated that it is concerned about the use of force against student protesters by police since the punishment of nonviolent student expression undermines academic freedom and democratic society generally.

3.3.12. Germany

Table 12 – Germany: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Germany	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.88	-0.06	-0.09	-0.09 ◆
Freedom to research and teach	3.32	-0.38	-0.56 ▼	-0.56 ▼◆
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.71	-0.19	-0.19	-0.19
Institutional autonomy	3.00	±0	-0.25	-0.25
Campus integrity	3.46	±0	-0.36	-0.36
Academic and cultural expression	3.13	-0.35	-0.58 ▼	-0.49

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for explanation of use of colours, see 3.3.1.

Germany is among the top 10-20% of countries in the world regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). Germany is marked red in the AFI 2025 update, implying that Germany's overall AFI index score has shown a statistically significant decline over the past decade (-0.09). At the same time, it is noted by the authors that while the decline is statistically significant, it is not substantially meaningful for the level of academic freedom in Germany over the past decade¹⁹. Of the individual indicators, 'freedom to research and teach' shows a substantially meaningful and statistically significant decline between 2014 and 2024 (-0.56) (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

¹⁷ See: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-02-11-university-of-toulouse-jean-jaures/>

¹⁸ See: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-02-12-university-of-lille/>

¹⁹ This is defined as an increase or decrease equal to or greater than 0.1 on the Academic Freedom Index over 10 years (Kinzelbach, et al., 2025, pp. 1-3).

The score for Germany on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

The Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project reports three cases of attacks on higher education in Germany in the period July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025.

The first report refers to a case where the University of Leipzig cancelled a previously approved lecture by Israeli historian Benny Morris, an emeritus professor of history at Ben Gurion University (SAR, 2025)²⁰. Scholars at Risk indicates that it is concerned about the cancellation of a previously approved on-campus, academic event since higher education leaders should respect academic freedom and make space for a diversity of views on campus by refraining from restrictions on academic activity.

The second report refers to a case where Ludwig Maximilian University cancelled a previously approved lecture on 'Colonialism, Human Rights and International Law' by Francesca Albanese, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territory (SAR, 2025)²¹. Scholars at Risk indicates that it is concerned about the cancellation of a previously approved on-campus, academic event since higher education leaders should respect academic freedom by refraining from restrictions on academic activity.

The third report refers to a case where a previously approved in-person public lecture featuring Francesca Albanese, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territory and Eyal Weizman, the director of the research agency Forensic Architecture at Goldsmiths, University of London, was cancelled by the Free University of Berlin (FU) (SAR, 2025)²². Scholars at Risk indicates that it is concerned about the cancellation of a previously approved academic event as a result of political pressure and due to stated security concerns. As argued by Scholars at Risk, external actors, including government officials and political actors, have a right to free expression, but should not be permitted to impose undue pressure on universities' academic decisions. Furthermore, higher education leaders should respect academic freedom by refraining from restrictions on academic activity.

3.3.13. Greece

Table 13 – Greece: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Greece	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.65	-0.11 ▼	-0.20 ▼	-0.22 ▼◆
Freedom to research and teach	2.45	-0.75 ▼	-1.05 ▼	-1.05 ▼◆
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.17	-0.19	-0.40	-0.40
Institutional autonomy	2.51	-0.13	-0.15	-0.04
Campus integrity	2.56	-0.09	-0.31	-0.31

²⁰ See: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2024-12-01-university-of-leipzig/>

²¹ See: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-01-31-ludwig-maximilian-university/>

²² See: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-02-12-free-university-of-berlin/>

Academic and cultural expression	2.77	±0	-0.68 ▼	-1.08 ▼◆
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Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

Greece is among the top 40-50% of countries in the world regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). Greece is marked red in the AFI 2025 update, implying that the overall AFI index score for Greece has shown a statistically significant decline over the past decade (-0.22). Of the individual indicators, 'freedom to research and teach' (-1.05) and 'academic and cultural expression' (-1.08) show a substantially meaningful and statistically significant decline between 2014 and 2024 (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

The score for Greece on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

The Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project reports four cases of attacks on higher education in Greece in the period July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025.

The first report refers to an incident at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki where students and police clashed during a protest demanding health and safety measures and increased funding for universities. Five students were arrested (SAR, 2025)²³. Scholars at Risk indicates that it is concerned about the use of force during a student protest since such actions, beyond harming the immediate victims, have a chilling effect on academic freedom.

The second report refers to an incident at the National Technical University of Athens' (NTUA) Zografou Polytechnic campus, where several unidentified assailants broke windows and set fire to the administration building causing significant damage (SAR, 2025)²⁴.

The third report refers to an incident at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens where several unknown assailants vandalised the office of the chair of the Philosophy Department (SAR, 2025)²⁵. Scholars at Risk indicates that it is concerned about violent and destructive attacks on campus, apparently intended to prevent the functioning of a higher education institution since such actions undermine academic freedom and democratic society generally.

The fourth report refers to a case where unknown assailants assaulted Sotiris Notaris, the chair of the mathematics department at the University of Athens and vandalised his office (SAR, 2025)²⁶.

Scholars at Risk indicates with respect to these cases that it is concerned about the use of force during a student protest, about violent attacks on a faculty member, as well as violent and destructive attacks on campus property, apparently intended to prevent the functioning of a higher education institution since such actions undermine academic freedom and democratic society generally.

²³ See: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2024-10-10-aristotle-university-of-thessaloniki/>

²⁴ See: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2024-11-08-national-technical-university-of-athens-zografou-polytechnic/>

²⁵ See: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-01-22-national-and-kapodistrian-university-of-athens/>

²⁶ See: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-02-19-university-of-athens/>

3.3.14. Hungary

Table 14 – Hungary: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Hungary	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.30	-0.02	-0.12 ▼	-0.26 ▼◆
Freedom to research and teach	1.66	±0	-0.10	-0.58 ▼◆
Academic exchange and dissemination	2.02	-0.14	-0.28	-0.45
Institutional autonomy	0.74	±0	-0.74 ▼	-1.19 ▼◆
Campus integrity	2.58	-0.17	-0.36	-0.52 ▼◆
Academic and cultural expression	1.79	±0	-0.44	-1.21 ▼◆

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

Hungary is among the bottom 20–30% countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). Hungary is marked red in the AFI 2025 update, implying that the overall AFI index score for Hungary has shown a statistically significant decline over the past decade (-0.26). Of the individual indicators, 'freedom to research and teach' (-0.58), 'institutional autonomy' (-1.19), 'campus integrity' (-0.52), and 'academic and cultural expression' (-1.21) show a substantially meaningful and statistically significant decline between 2014 and 2024 (Coppedge et al., 2025c). In addition, the indicator 'academic exchange and dissemination' has also declined, but this is not considered a substantially meaningful or statistically significant change in the score.

The score for Hungary on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 2, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). In its explanation of the score, the Freedom House report (2025a) raises a number of issues with respect to the state of academic freedom in Hungary:

- *The Fidesz-led government has maintained its efforts to bring schools and universities under close supervision. A gradual overhaul of the public education system raised concerns about excessive government influence on school curriculums, and the parliament has restructured institutions and their finances to increase government-appointed chancellors' powers. Authorities have increasingly threatened the academic autonomy of well-established institutions, pulling support, interfering in their affairs, and landing progovernment supporters in leading positions.*
- *The government has revoked accreditation from all gender studies programmes*
- *Progovernment media outlets commonly target activists, academics, programmes, and institutions, often by calling them "Soros agents," referring to Hungarian-born financier and philanthropist George Soros. Fidesz has targeted specific institutions by changing the requirements for operating universities in Hungary and by interfering in the appointment of universities' governing bodies. In 2023, the European*

Commission announced that it had suspended the rights of 21 universities managed by Fidesz-controlled boards to participate in the EU's Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe programmes until the risk of executive interference with university autonomy was reduced. The suspension remained in place at year-end 2024.

- During 2024, the government took steps to centralise the national research funding system, which critics fear will result in "more centralised, opaque, and potentially arbitrary" decisions on funding. The government also continued to push for the "privatisation" of state universities, intended to replace public management of the institutions with government-appointed boards of trustees.

3.3.15. Ireland

Table 15 – Ireland: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Ireland	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.92	±0	0.02	-0.02
Freedom to research and teach	3.61	±0	±0	-0.08
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.72	±0	+0.21	±0
Institutional autonomy	3.02	±0	±0	-0.09
Campus integrity	3.54	±0	±0	-0.26
Academic and cultural expression	3.79	±0	±0	±0

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

Ireland is among the top 10% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). The index and indicator scores for Ireland are stable, with no substantially meaningful or statistically significant changes over the past decade.

The score for Ireland on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.16. Italy

Table 16 – Italy: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Italy	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.89	-0.06	-0.06	-0.07

Freedom to research and teach	3.24	-0.53 ▼	-0.53 ▼	-0.53 ▼◆
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.78	±0	±0	-0.11
Institutional autonomy	2.78	-0.73 ▼	-0.58 ▼	-0.58 ▼◆
Campus integrity	3.85	±0	±0	±0
Academic and cultural expression	2.91	-0.23	-0.60 ▼	-0.82 ▼◆

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

Italy is among the top 10–20% of countries in the world regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al, 2025). The overall AFI index score for Italy is generally stable, with no substantially meaningful or statistically significant changes over the past ten years. Of the individual indicators, 'freedom to research and teach' (-0.53), 'institutional autonomy' (-0.58), and 'academic and cultural expression' (-0.82) show a substantially meaningful and statistically significant decline between 2014 and 2024 (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

The score for Italy on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

The Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project reports two cases of academic attacks in Italy in the period July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025.

The first case refers to clashes that broke out between members of the Student Collectives, a left-wing student group, and University Action (Azione), a right-wing student group, during student elections at Sapienza University of Rome (SAR, 2025)²⁷. Scholars at Risk indicates that it is concerned about violent attacks by students against other students in retaliation for exercising their rights to freedom of association and expression.

The second case refers to an incident at the University of Milan, where student protesters disrupted an on-campus event titled 'Welcoming life – Stories of free choice', resulting in the event's suspension (SAR, 2025)²⁸. Scholars at Risk indicates that it is concerned about efforts to shut down a campus discussion by members of the university community since attempts to shut down campus events and discourse undermine academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and democratic society generally.

3.3.17. Latvia

Table 17 – Latvia: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Latvia	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.92	±0	-0.05	-0.05

²⁷ See: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2024-11-21-sapienza-university-of-rome/>

²⁸ See: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2024-11-26-university-of-milan/>

Freedom to research and teach	3.04	±0	-0.79 ▼	-0.79 ▼◆
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.89	±0	±0	±0
Institutional autonomy	2.73	+0.07	-0.72 ▼	-0.72 ▼◆
Campus integrity	3.88	±0	±0	+0.10
Academic and cultural expression	3.71	±0	±0	-0.09

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

Latvia is among the top 10% of countries in the world regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). The overall AFI index score for Latvia is generally stable, with no substantially meaningful or statistically significant changes over the past ten years. Of the indicators, 'freedom to research and teach' (-0.79) and 'institutional autonomy' (-0.72) shows a substantially meaningful and statistically significant decrease between 2014 and 2024 (Coppedge, et al., 2025c).

The score for Latvia on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 3, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.18. Lithuania

Table 18 – Lithuania: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Lithuania	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.81	±0	-0.13 ▼	-0.14 ▼◆
Freedom to research and teach	3.20	-0.08	-0.52 ▼	-0.52 ▼◆
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.44	±0	-0.41	-0.41
Institutional autonomy	2.69	±0	-0.32	-0.54 ▼
Campus integrity	3.20	±0	-0.72 ▼	-0.72 ▼◆
Academic and cultural expression	3.11	±0	-0.17	-0.56 ▼◆

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

Lithuania is among the top 20–30% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). Lithuania is marked red in the AFI 2025 update, meaning that Lithuania's general AFI index score has shown a statistically significant decline over the past decade (-0.14). Of the individual indicators, 'freedom to research and teach' (-0.52), 'campus integrity' (-0.72), and 'academic and cultural expression' (-0.56) show a substantially meaningful and statistically significant decline between 2014 and 2024 (Coppedge, et al., 2025). In

addition, the 'institutional autonomy' indicator (-0.54) shows a significant, but not statistically significant, decline for the same period.

The score for Lithuania on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.19. Luxembourg

Table 19 – Luxembourg: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Luxembourg	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.89	-0.05	-0.05	-0.05
Freedom to research and teach	3.48	-0.20	-0.20	-0.20
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.44	-0.29	-0.29	-0.29
Institutional autonomy	2.82	±0	±0	±0
Campus integrity	3.61	-0.29	-0.29	-0.29
Academic and cultural expression	3.72	±0	±0	±0

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

Luxembourg is among the top 10-20% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). Luxembourg's overall AFI index score has remained stable over the past decade with only slight declines in the individual indicators 'freedom to research and teach' (-0.20), 'academic exchange and dissemination' (-0.29) and 'campus integrity' (-0.29) (Coppedge et al., 2025c). These changes are not regarded as substantially meaningful or statistically significant.

The score for Luxembourg on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.20. Malta

Table 20 – Malta: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Malta	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.87	±0	-0.01	-0.03
Freedom to research and teach	3.12	±0	-0.56 ▼	-0.65 ▼◆
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.81	±0	+0.26	+0.26

Institutional autonomy	2.43	±0	±0	±0
Campus integrity	3.83	±0	±0	±0
Academic and cultural expression	3.07	±0	+0.12	-0.05

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

Malta is among the top 10–20% countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). The overall AFI index score for Malta is generally stable, with no substantially meaningful or significant changes in the past decade. Of the individual indicators, 'freedom to research and teach' shows a substantially meaningful and statistically significant decline between 2014 and 2024 (-0.65) (Coppedge et al., 2025). Additionally, the indicator 'academic exchange and dissemination' shows a slight increase over the same time period (+0.26), which is neither substantially meaningful nor statistically significant.

The score for Malta on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.21. Netherlands

Table 21 – Netherlands: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year, and 10 year comparisons)

Netherlands	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.76	-0.04	-0.16 ▼	-0.12 ▼
Freedom to research and teach	2.72	±0	-0.48	-0.17
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.38	±0	-0.30	+0.14
Institutional autonomy	2.86	-0.37	-0.59 ▼	-0.59 ▼◆
Campus integrity	2.85	-0.36	-1.09 ▼	-1.09 ▼◆
Academic and cultural expression	3.31	±0	±0	-0.29

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

The Netherlands is among the top 30–40% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). The overall AFI index score for the Netherlands shows a substantially meaningful, but not statistically significant, decline over the past decade (-0.12). Of the individual indicators, 'institutional autonomy' (-0.59) and 'campus integrity' (-1.09) show a significant and statistically significant decline between 2014 and 2024 (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

The score for the Netherlands on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.22. Poland

Table 22 – Poland: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Poland	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.87	+0.12 ▲	-0.04	-0.11 ▼◆
Freedom to research and teach	3.37	+0.34	-0.26	-0.55 ▼◆
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.70	+0.56 ▲◆*	-0.09	-0.24
Institutional autonomy	2.81	0.30	-0.26	-0.65 ▼◆
Campus integrity	3.37	-0.16	-0.42	-0.52 ▼◆
Academic and cultural expression	3.30	±0	+0.87 ▲◆*	-0.24

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

*Recent developments in Poland have led to a substantially meaningful and statistically significant increase in two indicators in the last 5 years. Although the AFI 2025 update report limits itself to presenting statistically significant changes over the last decade, it is worthwhile highlighting these changes in scores.

Poland is among the top 30–40% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). Poland is marked red in the AFI 2025 update, meaning that Poland's general AFI index score has shown a statistically significant decline over the past decade (-0.11). Of the individual indicators, 'freedom to research and teach' (-0.55), 'institutional autonomy' (-0.65) and 'campus integrity' (-0.52) show a substantially meaningful and statistically significant decline between 2014 and 2024 (Coppedge et al., 2025c). At the same time, the indicators 'academic exchange and dissemination' (+0.56) and 'academic and cultural expression' (+0.87) show a substantially meaningful and statistically significant increase over the past one year and five year periods, respectively.

The score for Poland on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 3, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). In its explanation of the score, the Freedom House report (2025a) raises a number of issues with respect to the developing situation around academic freedom in Poland:

- *The right to pursue academic research is guaranteed by the constitution and has been upheld by courts, though political leaders have at times attempted to exert control over academic institutions, administrators, and scholarship. In September 2024, academics protested the replacement of the leader of IDEAS NCBR, a research and development center tasked with artificial intelligence research, accusing the government of making a political decision. In December, Science Minister Dariusz Wiczorek resigned following revelations of his improper ties with the rector of the University of Szczecin and reports that he had exposed a whistleblower who reported irregularities at the university.*
- *In July 2024, the government announced plans to liquidate the Copernicus Academy, which had been created under the previous government in 2022 to finance scientific research. The Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) had warned at the time that the*

new academy would duplicate much of its work and threaten its funding. Also in July, the government published a draft law to reform the PAN, prompting debate about whether the proposed structural changes would strengthen or weaken the institution's autonomy. The measures had yet to be finalised at year's end.

3.3.23. Portugal

Table 23 – Portugal: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Portugal	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.72	-0.22 ▼	-0.25 ▼	-0.24 ▼◆
Freedom to research and teach	2.80	-0.86 ▼	-1.07 ▼	-0.89 ▼◆
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.07	-0.73 ▼	-0.76 ▼	-0.76 ▼◆
Institutional autonomy	2.55	-0.63 ▼	-1.06 ▼	-1.06 ▼◆
Campus integrity	3.08	-0.45 ▼	-0.78 ▼	-0.78 ▼◆
Academic and cultural expression	3.00	±0	-0.75 ▼	-0.69 ▼◆

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

Portugal is among the top 30–40% of countries in the world regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update, (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). Portugal is marked red in the AFI 2025 update, meaning that the country's general AFI index score has shown a statistically significant decline over the past decade (-0.24). The scores for all five individual indicators show a substantially meaningful and statistically significant decline between 2014 and 2024: 'freedom to research and teach' (-0.89), 'academic exchange and dissemination' (-0.76), 'institutional autonomy' (-1.06), 'campus integrity' (-0.78), and 'academic and cultural expression' (-0.69) (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

The score for Portugal on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.24. Romania

Table 24 – Romania: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Romania	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.83	-0.01	-0.09	-0.09
Freedom to research and teach	3.38	±0	-0.31	-0.31
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.40	+0.13	-0.23	-0.23

Institutional autonomy	2.51	-0.05	-0.46	-0.46
Campus integrity	3.44	-0.20	-0.32	-0.32
Academic and cultural expression	2.98	±0	-0.35	-0.47

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

According to the AFI 2025 update, Romania ranks among the top 20–30% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). Romania's overall AFI index score has declined over the past decade (-0.09). Similarly, the individual indicators 'freedom to research and teach' (-0.31), 'institutional autonomy' (-0.46), 'campus integrity' (-0.32), and 'academic and cultural expression' (-0.47) declined over the same period (Coppedge et al., 2025c). However, these changes are not regarded as substantially meaningful or statistically significant.

The score for Romania on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 3, while in the previous four years, Romania's score on academic freedom was 4 (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.25. Slovakia

Table 25 – Slovakia: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Slovakia	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.88	-0.03	-0.07	-0.07
Freedom to research and teach	2.65	-0.76 ▼	-1.14 ▼	-1.14 ▼◆
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.86	+0.38	+0.20	+0.20
Institutional autonomy	3.26	+0.23	-0.17	-0.17
Campus integrity	3.79	±0	±0	±0
Academic and cultural expression	2.77	±0	-0.81 ▼	-0.86 ▼◆

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

According to the 2025 AFI update, Slovakia ranks among the top 10–20% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). Of the indicators, 'freedom to research and teach' (-1.14) and 'academic and cultural expression' (-0.86) show a substantially meaningful and statistically significant decline between 2014 and 2024 (Coppedge et al., 2025c). At the same time, the scores for 'academic exchange and dissemination' (+0.38) and 'institutional autonomy' (+0.23) increased in 2025, but not at a level considered substantially meaningful or statistically significant. The score for Slovakia on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The

explanation provided in the report for this score is that 'Academic freedom is guaranteed by the constitution and upheld by authorities' (Freedom House, 2025a).

3.3.26. Slovenia

Table 26 – Slovenia: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Slovenia	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.93	+0.01	-0.02	-0.02
Freedom to research and teach	3.56	+0.41	-0.09	-0.09
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.83	±0	+0.01	+0.01
Institutional autonomy	3.19	-0.30	-0.11	+0.02
Campus integrity	3.84	±0	±0	±0
Academic and cultural expression	2.98	±0	-0.69 ▼	-0.87 ▼◆

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use colours, see 3.3.1.

Slovenia is among the top 10% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). The overall AFI index score for Slovenia is generally stable, with no substantially meaningful or statistically significant changes over the past ten years. Among the individual indicators, 'academic and cultural expression' shows a substantially meaningful and statistically significant decline between 2014 and 2024 (-0.87) (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

The score for Slovenia on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.27. Spain

Table 27 – Spain: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Spain	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.88	+0.01	-0.07	-0.08
Freedom to research and teach	3.44	±0	-0.38	-0.38
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.52	±0	-0.31	-0.31
Institutional autonomy	3.05	±0	-0.35	-0.35
Campus integrity	3.56	+0.13	+0.13	+0.02

Academic and cultural expression	3.24	±0	-0.41	-0.62 ▼◆
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Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c); for an explanation of the use of colours, see 3.3.1.

Spain is among the top 10% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom according to the AFI 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). The overall AFI index score for Spain is stable, with no substantially meaningful or statistically significant changes over the past ten years. Among the individual indicators, 'academic and cultural expression' shows a substantially meaningful and statistically significant decline between 2014 and 2024 (-0.62) (Coppedge et al., 2025c). The score for Spain on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.3.28. Sweden

Table 28 – Sweden: Academic Freedom Index (2024 scores with 1 year, 5 year and 10 year comparisons)

Sweden	Current AFI scores (2024)	Score change – Last 1 year	Score change – Last 5 years	Score change – Last 10 years
Academic Freedom Index	0.94	±0	-0.01	-0.01
Freedom to research and teach	3.52	±0	+0.01	+0.01
Academic exchange and dissemination	3.92	±0	±0	±0
Institutional autonomy	2.54	±0	-0.34	-0.34
Campus integrity	3.85	±0	±0	±0
Academic and cultural expression	3.75	±0	-0.13	-0.13

Source: V-Dem Version 15 (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

According to the AFI 2025 update, Sweden ranks among the top 10% of countries worldwide regarding respect for academic freedom (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). The overall AFI index score and the scores of the five indicators for Sweden have remained generally stable, with no substantially meaningful or statistically significant changes over the past ten years (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

The score for Sweden on academic freedom in the 2025 edition of the Freedom in World report is 4, unchanged from the previous four years (Freedom House, 2025a). The 2025 report does not provide an explanation for this score.

3.4. Academic freedom trends in EU Member States

3.4.1. State of academic freedom in the EU according to the Academic Freedom Index: general score

The Academic Freedom Index (AFI) provides a general score measuring the level of academic freedom in each of the 179 countries covered comprised of five indicators (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). In this section we discuss the development and state of academic freedom in the EU Member States

as expressed through AFI's general score and its underlying indicators: Freedom to research and teach, Academic exchange and dissemination, Institutional autonomy, Campus integrity, and Academic and cultural expression²⁹.

The overall level of AFI scores and associated indicators for EU Member States is relatively positive and stable compared to the rest of the world, but with a slight downward trend. In comparison to the AFI 2024 update, the 2025 AFI update shows either no change or a slight increase or decline in the score for most EU Member States, with the only notable exceptions being Finland (-0.10), Greece (-0.11), Poland (+0.12) and Portugal (-0.21). Globally, EU Member States have relatively high scores: 23 Member States have Status A, and six are in the global top 10. In total, 18 Member States score above the EU average of 0.84, while nine (Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal and Romania) score below the EU average. Within the EU, four countries have been upgraded to a different status group: Croatia and Poland have moved from status B to status A, while the Netherlands and Portugal have moved from status A to status B. However, as with ranking individual countries, confidence intervals must be considered when determining a country's quintile or status group.

In total, 16 EU Member States have seen a deterioration in their AFI 2025 score compared to the scores in the past years. Nonetheless, it is important to separate mostly stable cases from cases which have declined significantly over a longer period. The AFI 2025 update has identified eight EU Member States which show a statistically significant decline in the AFI score over the last decade: Austria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, and Portugal (Kinzelbach et al., 2025, pp. 10-11). Greece and Lithuania are examples of countries which have slowly declined in their AFI score over the last several years. Finland and Portugal have both seen a statistically significant decline in their general AFI score in very recent years, with Portugal showing a particularly dramatic decline since the AFI 2024 update. Poland is a special case, with a long period of decline before its AFI showed a significant increase since 2022.

There is no EU Member State among the countries where respect for academic freedom has improved statistically significantly in the period 2014-2024 (Kinzelbach et al., 2025, pp. 10-11).

3.4.2. State of academic freedom in the EU according to the Academic Freedom Index: five individual sub-indicators

When looking at the development of the scores for individual AFI sub-indicators over the past decade, we see trends that can be interpreted in conjunction with the development of the overall AFI score. Table 29 shows all EU Member States with statistically significant changes in the scores for one or more AFI sub-indicators for academic freedom, as well as the changes in the scores. Hungary remains a special case within the EU, and the scores for the AFI sub-indicators reflect the country's long-term political development and its effects on the academic sector. Portugal offers a more recent example of significant decline, with the largest decline in sub-indicator scores occurring over the past 5-6 years, with a sharp drop in 2024. Portugal is also the only EU Member State to show a statistically significant decline on all five AFI sub-indicators. Of the five AFI sub-indicators, the 'academic exchange and dissemination' indicator is the most stable, with relatively high scores in all EU Member States. Scores for the other four sub-indicators have declined in several countries, providing some insight into the nature of the erosion of academic freedom in the EU.

²⁹ The tables presented in this section indicate scores provided by the most recent V-Dem dataset, and may therefore deviate from scores reported in previous AFI updates.

Table 29 – Overview of EU Member States that showed a statistically significant decline in individual AFI sub-indicators over the past ten years (2014–2024)

Country	Freedom to teach and research	Academic exchange and dissemination	Institutional autonomy	Campus integrity	Academic and cultural expression
Austria (*) (1)			-0.51		
Bulgaria (1)			-0.52		
Cyprus (1)			-0.82		
Germany (*) (1)	-0.56				
Greece (2)	-1.05				-1.08
Hungary (4)	-0.57		-1.18	-0.52	-1.08
Italy (4)	-0.53		-0.58	-0.52	-0.82
Latvia (2)	-0.79		-0.72		
Lithuania (*) (3)	-0.51			-0.72	-0.56
Malta (1)	-0.65				
Netherlands (2)			-0.59	-1.09	
Poland (*) (3)	-0.56		-0.64	-0.52	
Portugal (*) (5)	-0.89	-0.76	-1.06	-0.78	-0.69
Slovakia (2)	-1.14				-0.86
Slovenia (1)					-0.86

Source: (Coppedge et al., 2025)

Legend: Countries with a statistically significant decline in the main AFI score over the last decade are marked with an asterisk (*). The number of declining indicators are shown in brackets in the 'country' column. Note that this table does not include EU Member States which have not seen any significant changes in their scores for any of the AFI sub-indicators over the period 2014–2024.

In summary, it seems that while the EU enjoys some degree of lasting stability, a key trend is an overall negative development in most EU Member States with gradual changes from year to year. While most EU Member States have an overall AFI score above the EU average, the EU average has also declined over the last decade. This is in line with the declining level of academic freedom in key global regions, as measured by the AFI (see table 30).

Table 30 – Overview of average AFI score for major regions in the world, including the European Union (comparison 2014–2024; based on V-Dem classifications)

Region	Academic Freedom Index – score	
	2014 → 2024	Score change

	World	
World average	0.63 → 0.57	-0.06
	Europe and the European Union	
European Union	0.93 → 0.84	-0.09
Europe	0.86 → 0.78	-0.08
	Africa and Middle East	
Central Africa	0.49 → 0.36	-0.13
East/Horn Africa	0.47 → 0.43	-0.04
Middle East and North Africa (MENA)	0.37 → 0.29	-0.08
Southern Africa	0.6 → 0.57	-0.03
West Africa	0.74 → 0.65	-0.09
	Americas and Oceania	
Central America	0.8 → 0.61	-0.19
North America	0.92 → 0.75	-0.17
South America	0.8 → 0.7	-0.1
Oceania	0.79 → 0.83	+0.04
	Asia	
Central Asia	0.26 → 0.22	-0.04
East Asia	0.56 → 0.49	-0.07
South Asia	0.49 → 0.46	-0.03
Southeast Asia	0.43 → 0.38	-0.05

Source: (Coppedge et al., 2025)

3.5. Country-specific trends analysis

3.5.1. Introduction

In this part of the study an interpretation is provided of the state of de facto academic freedom in four EU Member States, Belgium, Finland, Italy and Poland. The interpretation consists of an update of country trend analyses presented in previous EP Academic Freedom Monitor reports³⁰ and is based on desk research and expert input. This study assesses the impact of the six identified factors that (potentially) threaten the de facto state of academic freedom in the selected EU Member

³⁰ See: Maassen et al. (2023), Craciun et al. (2024), and Maassen et al. (2025).

States. This approach has made it possible to identify areas where academic freedom is under pressure. It has also highlighted the need for initiatives to strengthen the protection of academic freedom.

3.5.2. Academic freedom – core dimensions and conditions

There is no globally agreed upon academic or legal definition of academic freedom, and variations remain in whether academic freedom is defined in a narrow manner (as an individual right of members of the academic profession) or more broadly (by including also students and administrative staff or also considering institutional aspects rather than merely individual ones) (see also Kovács, 2025; Kovács and Spannagel, 2025).

The studies conducted since 2022 for the EP Academic Freedom Monitor identified core dimensions and conditions that allow for an examination and discussion of the current state of academic freedom in the EU Member States³¹. In determining the academic freedom dimensions and conditions to be examined, the EP Academic Freedom Monitor undertakes a thorough examination of two key European interpretations of academic freedom, namely those presented in the Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research and the Rome Ministerial Communiqué of the European Higher Education Area. Building on these two European interpretations and scholarly work on academic freedom, the starting point for this study is that academic freedom is an individual freedom. At the same time, academic freedom does not exist in a vacuum; it operates within a specific institutional context, which has traditionally been the university and which has more recently has been argued to encompass all higher education institutions and other research performing organisations (RPOs). RPOs are defined as any non-profit organisations that perform scientific research (Council Recommendation of 14 May 2024, recital 18(3)). This institutional setting of RPOs has a principal responsibility for safeguarding the optimal exercise of academic freedom, and the exercise of academic freedom is uniquely placed within these organisations. It is also important to keep in mind that academic freedom is never absolute, it is contextually bound. There are legitimate constraints on academic freedom, for example, provided by science ethics and research integrity guidelines, and specific laws and regulations, which have been evolved over time, implying that what may have been considered acceptable academic activities decades ago, might not be considered acceptable now. Academic freedom may also be limited to protect other individual rights, such as the right to privacy and freedom of conscience and religion (Stachowiak-Kudła, 2021, pp. 170-171). As societies evolve, new expectations arise that may necessitate a renegotiation of academic freedom.

The following core dimensions of and conditions for academic freedom are identified in this study:

Core dimensions of and conditions for academic freedom

Source : Kovács and Rónay (2023); Maassen et al (2023); Craciun et al (2024)

Core dimensions

- **Freedom to research:** *this dimension concerns the freedom of individual academic staff to develop and follow their own research agenda without any undue political, administrative, religious, economic, social, cultural, or academic infringements. The freedom referred to here is not absolute, but has to be exercised within the generally accepted framework conditions for academic freedom.*
- **Freedom to teach, and freedom to study:** *This dimension concerns the freedom of individual academic staff to develop and follow their own teaching agendas and aspirations, and the*

³¹ See the onion model introduced in 2022 which identifies essential (orange) and supportive (blue) elements of academic freedom (Kovács and Rónay, 2023, p. 12).

freedom of students to develop and follow their own study preferences without any undue political, administrative, religious, economic, social, cultural, or academic infringements. The freedom referred to here is not absolute, but has to be exercised within the generally accepted framework conditions for academic freedom.

- **Freedom of academic expression:** This dimension concerns the freedom of academic staff and students to express themselves on the basis of their academic area(s) of expertise or field(s) of study within their institution and the wider academic community on academic and/or governance matters, without any undue internal or external pressures or risks of being punished. In addition, it concerns the freedom of academic staff to collaborate with other academics nationally and internationally, and publish, disseminate and exchange research findings through academic and non-academic outlets without any undue internal or external infringements, violations, threats or pressures.

Conditions for academic freedom

- **Institutional autonomy:** This condition concerns the room to manoeuvre of higher education institutions to manage their own internal academic and administrative affairs without undue external interference. The interference referred to here can be political/legal, religious, economic, social, or cultural in nature and may affect the procedural and/or substantive autonomy of higher education institutions.
- **Self-governance:** This condition concerns the right of academic staff and students to be involved in governance of their institution and to participate in decision-making processes on academic matters.
- **Labour conditions:** This condition concerns the extent to which the employment contracts of academic staff create the conditions under which all members of the academic community can exercise their academic freedom without fear of losing their jobs (permanent staff), having their contracts not renewed, or jeopardising their access to a permanent position being (non-permanent staff).
- **Financial conditions:** This condition concerns the extent to which the funding situation for education and/or research has an undue impact on the freedom of academic staff to develop and follow their own teaching and research agendas, and the freedom of students to develop and pursue their own study preferences.

3.5.3. Six sources of threats to academic freedom

The studies conducted since 2022 within the framework of the EP Academic Freedom Monitor show that while there is no crisis of academic freedom in the EU, there are developments in every Member State that could be interpreted as potential threats to one or more dimensions or conditions of academic freedom. The following six sources are underlying these threats.

Political interference

This category concerns the ways in which political actors, that is, governments and their agencies, and individual politicians, such as members of parliament and their parties, unduly restrict the opportunities for academics and students to optimally exercise their academic freedom.

Institutional leadership and management

This category concerns the ways in which the leadership and management of universities, colleges, and research institutes unduly limit the opportunities for academics and students to optimally exercise their academic freedom. This category includes both formal academic institutional leaders, such as presidents, rectors, vice-chancellors, and deans, as well as institutional administrative

leaders/managers, such as directors of administrative offices, and managers responsible for administrative procedures and routines.

The academic community

This category refers to the ways in which members of the academic community, both staff and students, unduly restrict the ability of other academics and students to optimally exercise their academic freedom.

Societal actors

This category concerns the ways in which individual citizens or social groups unlawfully restrict the opportunities for academics and students to optimally exercise their academic freedom. The use of social media plays a significant role in societal attacks on academia, negatively impacting academic freedom.

Private sector

This category refers to the ways in which private companies and organisations, such as foundations, unduly limit the opportunities for academics and students to optimally exercise their academic freedom. In some cases legal instruments, such as strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPS)³², are used to silence academic voices.

European and national security policies and foreign interference

This category concerns the ways in which European and national security concerns and policies, particularly those that have emerged as a result of recent geopolitical developments, unduly restrict the ability of academics and students to optimally exercise their academic freedom. Proposed and realised changes in the funding of scientific research ('dual use of research'), knowledge export regulations and 'responsible internationalisation' are relevant outcomes of these concerns and policies. A significant threat to academic freedom, which in many ways complements security policy, is foreign interference in European academia³³.

These six potential sources of threats to academic freedom are used in this study to structure the data collection and analysis, and will be further developed and refined based on the study's findings.

The four country reports presented in 3.6. provide an overview of potential threats to, and where applicable, violations of academic freedom in four selected EU Member States. The presentation of the identified threats and violations is organised according to the six potential sources of threats introduced above. Each country report shows which of the identified dimensions and conditions of academic freedom may be threatened by which of the six sources factors. Where relevant, feedback and input from the Sounding Board and academic experts have been incorporated into the country reports.

3.5.4. Objectives

This study provides an overview of recent trends (2024–2025) in academic freedom in four selected EU Member States. It is based on desk research, expert input and interviews with national

³² See, e.g., <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/slapps-and-other-legal-threats-against-academics>; and: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/democracy-eu-citizenship-anti-corruption/democracy-and-electoral-rights/protecting-journalists-and-human-rights-defenders-strategic-lawsuits-against-public-participation_en

³³ Foreign interference can cover a wide range of activities, including manipulative online practices, illicit party or campaign financing, covert influence peddling, and direct action against individuals (see: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/760355/EPRS_ATA\(2024\)760355_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/760355/EPRS_ATA(2024)760355_EN.pdf))

stakeholders and provides insight into public debates on academic freedom³⁴. This overview is an update of the reports for the four selected countries included in previous EP Academic Freedom Monitor studies (Maassen et al., 2023; Craciun et al., 2024; Maassen et al., 2025). This study assesses the potential impact of identified factors that threaten de facto academic freedom in the selected EU Member States. It identifies tensions and areas where gaps exist and where further action may be needed.

3.6. Country-specific trends reports

3.6.1. Belgium

Introduction

Belgium ranks among the EU Member States with the strongest record of academic freedom, as shown by the AFI and the country chapter on Belgium in the 2023 EP Academic Freedom Monitor study (Maassen et al., 2023)³⁵. The latter study indicated that Belgium has a high level of respect for de facto academic freedom, with regular discussions between the academic community and government(s) on how to balance different priorities. Some concerns were raised though, including the potentially unhealthy climate of debate within academia and the role and responsibilities of academics in addressing societal issues.

Although Belgium has a positive academic freedom reputation compared to almost all other EU Member States, this year's study identified several areas for concern. These include the level of public funding, research security, the impact of political developments in the US, and the threat of foreign interference from China. This last aspect is discussed in chapter 4.

Political interference

There are no indications that Belgian governments or politicians attempted to directly intervene in academic freedom during the reporting period. However, an important point of concern is the restrictive policy regarding the language of instruction and the mandated introduction of new study programmes at universities in the Dutch- and French-speaking areas of Belgium³⁶. This concern can be illustrated by the recent discussions about the requirement that the language of instruction for all courses at Flemish universities must be Dutch, with the possibility of also offering a course in English in certain cases. The Flemish government has rejected requests from Flemish universities to exempt certain courses from this rule (O'Regan, 2024).

Regarding potential indirect political interference in academic freedom, the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) and the Council of French-speaking Rectors (Conseil des Rectrices et Recteurs Francophones-CRef) have expressed their concerns about the negative direction of federal funding levels for the university sector. Joint statements point out that the cuts and reforms to the federal budget are detrimental to achieving the funding targets set by previous governments and to the competitiveness of Belgian universities (Conseil des Rectrices et Recteurs Francophones, 2025; Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad, 2024). In addition to disapproval of public funding cuts, the councils have also criticised a proposed public sector pension reform (Conseil des Rectrices et Recteurs

³⁴ For an elaboration of the methodological approach used in producing the country overviews, see annex 1

³⁵ In the 2023 report, the consequence for the academic sector of the federal organisation of the country in three communities, which were given in 1989 authority over education, was discussed. In this, the unique nature and complexity of the governance, organisation and funding of Belgian universities were introduced in some detail (Maassen et al., p. 26).

³⁶ For the mandated procedures for the introduction of new study programmes at Flemish universities, see: <https://www.nvao.net/nl/procedures/nederland/accreditatie-nieuwe-opleiding>. For the procedures in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, see: <https://www.ares-ac.be/en/authorisations-procedures>

Francophones, 2024; Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad, 2024). An in-depth analysis by CRef criticises the pension reform for having a discriminatory impact on academic staff pensions, retroactively reducing the value of previous pension contributions, reducing the attractiveness of an academic career, and widening the gap between the public and private sectors (Conseil des Rectrices et des Recteurs Francophones, 2025).

Institutional leadership and management

The leadership of Belgian research universities, universities of applied sciences, and research institutes is generally committed to promoting and protecting academic freedom within their institutions. The commitment of institutional leaders to academic freedom can be illustrated by the Joint statement (published 8 July 2025) by the Rectors of the 10 Belgian universities on academic freedom. In the statement, the rectors address the current threats to academic freedom and acknowledge that, in practice, the protection of academic freedom remains inconsistent and too often symbolic. They further emphasise that university leaders must commit to a culture of openness, not compliance³⁷.

At the same time, there is some concern about the response of university leaders to politically motivated student and/or staff actions, especially in relation to the Gaza-Israel conflict. For example, the rector of the University of Antwerp filed an internal institutional complaint against two students in connection with pro-Palestinian protests in the university auditorium. This complaint was, however, withdrawn after a meeting between the rector and the students³⁸. At the University of Ghent professors expressed concern about academic freedom in relation to a statement of the rector in relation to the Gaza-Israel conflict³⁹. Overall, however, both in the French and Flemish Communities, potential tensions regarding academic freedom between institutional leadership and the academic community in Belgium are relatively moderate compared to the situation at universities in other EU Member States.

The academic community

There are certain concerns about the relative lack of tolerance for dissenting ideas and opinions that characterises some groups within Belgian academia. These concerns have led to a debate about the extent to which two camps can be distinguished within the Belgian academic community. One side is said to be concerned about 'woke activism and cancel culture' and promotes freedom of speech on campus, while the other side is said to want to promote academic justice and combat the harassment of students and staff based on their political affiliations or identity. The activities of these two camps can be perceived as offensive and polarising by the other. An example is the establishment by some academics of a group called Hypatia with a 'reporting point' for woke incidents⁴⁰, that was criticised by opponents. Another example is the critical response to a lecture series on 'transgenderism' at the University of Antwerp, where opponents tried to convince the rector to cancel the lectures. It was contended that the lecture series were 'transphobic', since the questions addressed were incorrect, the terms used, such as transgender instead of trans people, were outdated, and some of the invited speakers were regarded to be too critical to the right of

³⁷ The statement is entitled 'Stand up for academic freedom: not a privilege, but one of the keys for a free society', see: <https://www.unamur.be/en/newsroom/stand-academic-freedom-not-privilege-one-keys-free-society>

³⁸ See: <https://www.demorgen.be/snelnieuws/rector-uantwerpen-laat-klacht-tegen-studenten-vallen-opbouwend-gesprek-gehad-met-studenten-en-personeelsleden~b236ec48/>

³⁹ See: https://www.vrt.be/vrtmax/luister/radio/d/de-wereld-vandaag~11-10/de-wereld-vandaag~11-33727-0/fragment~dd1574cf-9a3a-4299-875e-9b695afd9f4f/?utm_campaign=app-share. See also: <https://www.belganewsagency.eu/ugent-academics-disrupt-universitys-opening-ceremony-with-demand-for-israeli-boycott>

⁴⁰ In Dutch: 'meldpunt', see: <https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/groep-academici-lanceert-meldpunt-voor-woke-incidenten/>

trans people⁴¹. According to certain members of the academic community, the issue at hand pointed to 'the need to step outside the two-camp framework and prevent the university from becoming an institution suffering from chronic, irritable burns'⁴².

Moreover, a study commissioned by the Flemish Interuniversity Council (Verhaeghe, 2023) shows that approximately 45% of academic staff at Flemish universities have experienced some form of harassment at some point in their career. The study's findings suggest that harassment by colleagues is the most common form, primarily harassment related to academic freedom and integrity, such as pressure to use certain theories, change the content of research, or alter the interpretation of findings. A second form of harassment relates to work pressure, while a third form is toxic behaviour at work, such as 'bullying, gossiping, emotional abuse or psychological games' (Verhaeghe, 2023, p. 26). A small proportion of the respondents (about 4.5%) indicate that they have been harassed by students at their own university, in the form of 'denigrating comments in student evaluations, verbal aggression (online or offline) and legal procedures by students with respect to their study results' (Verhaeghe, 2023, pp. 27).⁴³

Societal actors

The study by Verhaeghe (2023, p. 35) indicates that approximately 9% of Flemish academics have experienced moderate or serious forms of harassment from society 'by people they do not or hardly know, organised groups, parties or associations'. Academics from the humanities, social sciences and biological sciences are much more exposed to this form of external harassment than academics from the natural sciences and engineering sciences. The respondents mentioned harassment 'by politicians, political movements or unknown people on social media, but sometimes also in the press, often after a public performance or communication of study results'. This form of harassment often consists of publicly attacking academic credibility, trolling and insulting, and demanding dismissal. Verhaeghe (2023, p. 27) pointed out that comments on social media sometimes have a sexist or racist tone⁴⁴.

Private sector actors

Regarding the period under review, the available information sources did not reveal any specific concerns or infringements of academic freedom by private sector actors, beyond what was mentioned in the pilot study (Maassen et al., 2023). However, to gain a complete picture of the potential impact of specific actions by private sector actors on academic freedom in Belgium, additional empirical research is necessary.

Security policies and foreign interference⁴⁵

Since early 2025, the federal government, the governments of the Flemish and Walloon communities, as well as the academic community in Belgium, have been paying considerable attention to the restrictions and budget cuts imposed by the current US administration on academia in the US and their potential consequences for the global research and innovation system. The main concerns expressed by governments and the academic community concern Belgian students enrolled at US institutions affected by the US administration's policies and the conditions under which Belgian research collaborations with US institutions can take place in the future (Chini, 2025).

⁴¹ See: <https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/onvrede-aan-uantwerpen-bij-lezingenreeks-over-trans-personen/>

⁴² See: <https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/maatschappij/veiligheid-en-weerbaarheid-aan-de-universiteit-academische-vrijheid-verdient-beter-dan-een-gepolariseerd-wij-zij-debat/>

⁴³ See also: Lakeman et al. (2022).

⁴⁴ When it comes to harassment by societal groups or actors, see also Tibo (2025)

⁴⁵ See also the discussion on the responses of Belgian public authorities and higher education institutions to foreign interference from China in chapter 4 of this report.

The issue primarily concerns the state of academic freedom in the US, but is nevertheless relevant to academic freedom in Belgium, as it poses a challenge, for example, to Belgian academic data sovereignty⁴⁶ and to safeguard student freedom within partnerships involving Belgian universities.

Research collaboration is affected by imposed restrictions and requirements on joint research activities with US partners. For example, the US Embassy in Belgium sent a survey to Flemish universities asking for their positions on issues related to diversity, gender ideologies, climate justice, and international relations with countries such as China and Russia (Belga News Agency, 2025). Not only are collaborative research projects, particularly those investigating topics of sensitive concern to the US government, at risk of being shut down or losing their funding, but important research data stored on US servers is also at risk of becoming inaccessible or deleted (Giordano, 2025).

The Parliament of the French-speaking Community in Belgium has adopted a resolution reaffirming the importance of academic freedom in light of the US administration's threats to American research and scientists. These American developments are seen as a blow to the global research, development, and innovation (RDI) ecosystem. The resolution emphasises that Belgian research projects and resources allocated to research are exposed to threats posed by the US administration (Parlement de la Communauté Française, 2025). The Flemish parliament has similarly put the issue of 'the protection of academic freedom and international students' on the parliamentary agenda, but the parliament and the assigned working group have yet to publish a resolution or report on the topic (Vlaams Parlement, 2025).

Conclusions

Aside from government interference through language policy, academic freedom in Belgium is not subject to direct political interference. The potential impact of indirect political interference on academic freedom is primarily discussed in relation to the level of public funding for higher education and research. The concerns and potential problems around academic freedom in Belgium identified in our study relate to moderate tensions between institutional leadership and the academic community, emerging polarisation within the academic community and forms of harassment within academia, and generally moderate attacks from society on academics. From a geopolitical perspective, both foreign interference by China and recent initiatives by the US Administration are regarded as posing threats to academic freedom in Belgium. Overall, the situation regarding academic freedom in Belgium is positive, and none of these issues pose a significant threat in itself. However, without effective countermeasures, they could collectively pose a serious threat to academic freedom in Belgium in the short to medium term.

3.6.2. Finland

Introduction

Finland has traditionally been among the EU Member States with the strongest state of academic freedom as expressed in its high position in the AFI and highlighted in the country chapter on Finland the 2023 EP Academic Freedom Monitor study (Maassen et al., 2023)⁴⁷. The latter study found that academic freedom in Finland is firmly anchored in both legislation and the strategic position of higher education institutions and the sector ministry. Overall, the two main issues with respect to

⁴⁶ See, e.g., <https://trends.knack.be/opinie/digitale-soevereiniteit-is-niet-enkel-een-geopolitieke-kwestie-het-is-een-economische-noodzaak/>;
https://www.serv.be/sites/default/files/documenten/SERV_20240624_Digitale_strategische_autonomie_RAP.pdf

⁴⁷ This perspective that academic freedom is traditionally well protected in Finland is also highlighted in academic studies; see, e.g., Brewis (2025, p. 216).

academic freedom identified in the 2023 study were the relatively unstable public funding support for higher education and research, and the harassment of academics through social media.

However, the 2025 AFI update indicated a substantial decline in Finland's overall score (0.83) (Kinzelbach, et al., 2025). Recent attention to the state of academic freedom in Finland has focused primarily on the government's approach to governing and financing universities, universities of applied sciences, and the research and innovation sector, as well as the impact of geopolitical tensions on Finnish higher education and research.

Political interference

Regarding public funding, there is growing concern within the academic community about recent budget cuts and the increasing use by public authorities of competitive and targeted funding instruments, largely at the expense of traditional flexible and core funding approaches. The previous government adopted a 2024–2030 funding plan aimed at increasing government spending on research and development to 4 percent of GDP by 2030 (Finnish Government, 2024). The plan emphasised the importance of scientific freedom, predictability, and technological neutrality as guiding policy and funding principles, and provided guidelines for increasing funding for basic research and research infrastructure. The current government has proposed cuts to the university and research and innovation sectors as part of an austerity plan in the state budget. This has led to strong criticism from academia, given the previous commitments and legal obligations of the 2024–2030 multi-year plan (Finnish Ministry of Finance, 2025; Myklebust, 2025c). While the current government's proposed budget includes an investment of resources in competitive and targeted funding instruments from bodies such as the Finnish Research Council, the Strategic Research Council, and Business Finland, it also proposes severe cuts to core university funding and a freeze on the university funding index. The academic community has criticised the political process and expressed concerns about the autonomy and room for manoeuvre of universities, as well as about academic freedom (Finnish Union of University Professors, 2025b; Niinistö-Sivuranta et al., 2025; Union of Research Professionals, 2025).

The government had also tabled a proposal to amend the Act on the Research Council of Finland with the aim to allow it to assess research proposals based on potential conflicts with national security interests, international obligations, or Finland's foreign and security policy (Finnish Union of University Professors, 2025a). The change would pose a potential threat to academic freedom by introducing legislation that would allow for the political steering of the requirements for the competitive funding of basic research projects on the basis of upholding national security. The proposal was criticised by the academic community (Sajari, 2025; The Council of Rectors of Finnish Universities, 2025), and later removed by the government's Education Committee (Savonen, 2025).

Now that the changes at the Finnish Academy have been avoided, the government's approach to the governance of Finnish universities and research does not constitute a direct infringement of academic freedom. However, the academic community is concerned about how funding instruments based on competitive, targeted, performance, and potentially also security criteria might restrict institutional autonomy and academic freedom. It should also be mentioned that while the constitution confers protection of academic freedom to research universities, Finnish universities of applied sciences (or polytechnics) do not enjoy the same protection (Nordic Academic Trade Unions, 2024).

While the public debates on academic freedom in Finland have largely focused on political interference concerns and foreign interference (see below), the examination of recent trends in academic freedom discussed in the following three sections are mainly based on three studies (Oksanen, et al., 2022 ; Nordic Academic Trade Unions, 2024; Kallio et al., 2025) and interviews with stakeholders.

Institutional leadership and management

In the report by the Nordic Academic Trade Unions (2024, p. 29), a comparison is made of the de jure and de facto state of academic freedom in four Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden). In the country chapter on Finland the report argues that the de facto state of academic freedom is influenced by the centralisation of institutional management. This is elaborated with reference to the relationship between the statutory organs of the Finnish university, that is, the university collegium (which represents the members of the university community), the executive board and the rector. It is claimed that various studies have shown that each university has different working methods when it comes to the relationships between these statutory governing bodies. According to the Trade Unions' report (2024, p. 31), the common perception is that the university collegium has become a rather passive body under the Universities Act of 2009, compared to the previous collegium under the Universities Act of 1997, with a concentration of power in the board and the rector. The report (2024, p. 31) further states that 'the perceived legitimacy of the principal's actions has declined', but provides no insight into why this would be the case, nor how this development might have occurred. According to the report, there is no legislative action in sight to change university governance structures, as universities, in principle, have the authority to regulate their own governance structures and practices based on their institutional autonomy.

The study by Kallio et al. (2025) examined the influence of academic systems and career models on academic staff at universities in Finland and Sweden, with a focus on the potential impacts of perceived performance pressure. Based on comparable qualitative and quantitative data, the authors argue that the findings of their study shed light on tensions between performance management and academic freedom. They conclude that the performance pressure that academics according to their study experience suggests that all forms of academic freedom are eroding in both countries (Kallio et al., 2025, p. 17). The findings further indicate that the differences between the two countries are most pronounced in the experiences of academics on fixed-term contracts, which are much more common in Finland than in Sweden (Kallio et al., 2025, p. 17).

While both studies present valuable insights into the impact of institutional leadership and management on academic freedom, additional empirical research is needed to gain a more complete picture of the potential impact of specific actions by institutional leadership and management on academic freedom in Finland.

Academic community

The study by Oksanen et al. (2022) investigated online harassment victimisation among university researchers and teachers. The study indicates (2022, p. 557) that approximately 30% of the respondents reported online harassment in the previous 6 months, with 5% reporting monthly and 1% weekly harassment. In almost 18% of the cases, the harasser was a member of the respondent's work community at their university. Furthermore, respondents who were targeted by a colleague from their work community reported higher post-traumatic stress disorder scores, lower perceived social support at work, and a higher impact of perceived online harassment on their work compared to other victims (Oksanen, et al., 2022, pp. 554-556). Like studies on the state of academic freedom conducted in other EU Member States (e.g. Tovatt, et al., 2024; Verhaeghe, 2023), the study by Oksanen et al. (2022) shows that harassment within academia is a problem with a potentially serious impact on academic freedom.

Societal actors

The study by Oksanen et al. (2022) indicates that the majority of the respondents who have experienced online harassment in the last 6 months were harassed by individuals or groups from outside the academic community. Victims of online harassment were more often senior staff members, minority group members, and mostly from the social sciences and humanities (2022, p. 551-554). Presence in both traditional media and social media were major risk factors for

harassment, with 'hostile, hateful, and harassing behaviour having become a mainstream and highly common phenomenon on Facebook and Twitter', which potentially has serious implications for academic freedom, democracy and freedom of speech (Oksanen, et al., 2022, p. 558). Furthermore, most online harassment victims were reluctant to report even serious crimes such as death threats to the police because they thought the crime was not serious enough and/or that reporting it would not lead to any actions. According to Oksanen et al. (2022, p. 558), 'These troubling results indicate that a greater problem of cybercrime is not being recognised as quite as serious as offline offences, despite its clearly negative outcomes both for the victim and society'.

Private sector actors

In the period under review the available sources of information did not reveal any specific worries about or infringements on academic freedom in Finland by private sector actors beyond what was mentioned in the pilot study (Maassen et al., 2023). The two studies mentioned above (Nordic Academic Trade Unions, 2024; Oksanen, et al., 2022) also mentioned no reports of infringements of academic freedom by private sector actors. However, for getting a comprehensive understanding of the possible impact on academic freedom in Finland of specific actions of private sector actors, additional empirical research would be necessary.

Security policies and foreign interference

There have been some debates in the Finnish academic community on a government law proposal announced December 2024. The law would oblige the Research Council of Finland to fund only research that is in line with Finnish national security and foreign security policy. The press release about the law proposal from the Ministry of Education and Culture states that, 'a provision will be added to the law according to which the performance of the Research Council's tasks may not conflict with Finland's national security, Finland's international obligations or Finland's foreign and security policy'.⁴⁸ Parts of the academic community are highly critical towards this law proposal and accuse the proposal of going against academic freedom protected by the constitution. It was, for example, argued that the wording of the legislation seems rather flexible, and not clarifying what 'in opposition to the national security' means in practice (Myklebust, 2025a). The then Minister of Education and Culture defended the bill, stating that it is a misunderstanding to claim that academic freedom is at risk. Apparently, the purpose of the legislation is to ensure that knowledge and technology produced in Finland is not going to be utilised by authoritarian countries. This fear for undesirable transfer of knowledge and technology is also an issue in other EU Member States, and at the European level⁴⁹. It therefore remains important to see how the Research Council of Finland will interpret and apply the law, and to monitor the extent to which it will affect international research collaboration and openness in research (Myklebust, 2025a).

Finnish higher education has been impacted since January 2025 by the US Administration's general Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies and sector-specific higher education and research policies in several ways relevant to academic freedom. The policies aim to restrict the use of language related to diversity, equity and inclusion in documents used in research projects and grants funded by the US. This could result in the withdrawal or suspension of federal US funding. The DEI restrictions and the subsequent actions of the US government with respect to existing and future funding arrangements with Finnish institutions was condemned as academic censorship by the academic community (Myklebust, 2025b). It was argued that they serve to limit the academic freedom of Finnish researchers through explicit restrictions on language and research agendas. An illustrative case which has garnered a significant amount of attention relates to doctoral researcher

⁴⁸ See: <https://okm.fi/sv/-/andringar-i-lagstiftningen-om-finlands-akademi>

⁴⁹ See also chapter 4 in this report.

whose scholarship and visa to the US were revoked on the basis of her research topic relating to how American teacher education programmes address racism (Helsinki Times, 2025).

Conclusion

Concerns about de facto academic freedom in Finland relate to the increased use of competitive and targeted funding and performance indicators, and to pressure on institutional autonomy and researchers' academic freedom through political control and oversight, and intensifying performance pressure on academics. For example, recent fluctuations in government funding policies have created an environment of uncertainty and instability for both researchers and universities. Moreover, there are growing concerns about the politicisation of academia in relation to government policies on research risks and national security. There are also concerns about harassment of academics, both within the academic community and from society at large. Finally, since January 2025, the US administration has implemented several policies that negatively impact academic freedom in the US, while there are legitimate concerns about their impact on academic freedom in Finland.

3.6.3. Italy

Introduction

Previous studies conducted for the EP Academic Freedom Monitor have not revealed any significant external or internal threats or violations of academic freedom in Italy. As also indicated by the AFI, Italy has traditionally been characterised by a strong and stable de facto record of academic freedom. However, as also indicated in section 3.2.16 of this report, academic freedom in Italy appears to be under pressure. Several characteristics of the Italian academic system and its governance may contribute to a gradual erosion of academic freedom in the country, as discussed in greater detail below.

Recent concerns regarding academic freedom have focused on the relatively weak, and in some respects precarious, public funding base for Italian universities and research, certain governance practices related to institutional personnel policies, and the generally poor working conditions faced by academic staff. Moreover, the current national government does not appear to prioritise higher education and science, and the wider effects of geopolitical conflicts on academic freedom within the EU are also felt in Italy. On the latter point, government policy on security issues in this area is still at a relatively early stage of development, and its impact on academic freedom appears to be generally more limited compared to the situation in other EU Member States.

Political interference

In recent years, concerns have arisen about indirect forms of government interference with academic freedom in Italy. These relate, amongst other things, to the level of public funding for higher education and research. Italy's gross domestic expenditure on R&D remains significantly below the average for EU Member States⁵⁰ and the level of the basic public funding for higher education and research has hardly increased in absolute terms over the last two years⁵¹.

⁵⁰ In 2023 the gross domestic expenditure on R&D in Italy was 1.38% (relative to GDP), compared to EU average of 2.26%, with Sweden being the EU Member State with the highest gross domestic expenditure on R&D with 3.64%. See: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=R%26D_expenditure

⁵¹ For details of the development of the public budget for higher education and research, see the website of the Ministry of Universities and Research for information about the public funding of the sector through the Fondo di Finanziamento Ordinario (FFO), <https://www.mur.gov.it/it/aree-tematiche/universita/programmazione-e-finanziamenti/finanziamenti>, and <https://www.mur.gov.it/it/news/lunedì-01092025/universita-piu-risorse-tutti-atenei-italiani-da-mur-prima-ripartizione-ffo>

In the short term, the decline in public investment in research has been largely offset by the influx of funds provided through the EU-backed National Plan for Recovery and Resilience (PNRR)⁵². PNRR funds are, however, reserved for projects aimed at advancing the plan's designated strategic areas, and cannot be used to finance research outside these areas, or to cover other expenditures by universities with access to these funds terminating in 2026.

Overall, the academic community has responded critically to the funding situation of Italian universities (Consiglio Universitario Nazionale, CUN). An open letter signed by 119 Italian scientific societies, for example, criticised the government's efforts to introduce administrative and structural downsizing, and budget cuts to the sector. This could potentially lead to greater inequality between urban and rural areas, a decline in academic quality, and a threat to postgraduate employability (Research Professional News, 2024).

Before 2024, the Fund for Regular Financing of Universities (*Fondo di Finanziamento Ordinario* – FFO) experienced gradual nominal growth. In particular, the then-government provided in the 2022 budget law for a gradual increase in the FFO until 2026, with a target of €9.5 billion in 2025, compared to €8.6 billion in 2022. The actual FFO for 2023 was approximately €9.21 billion, which is in line with the forecasts in the 2022 Budget Act. However, in 2024, there was a sharp slowdown: the new government reduced university funding from the planned €9.45 billion to €9.03 billion. The FFO for 2025 was approximately €9.37 billion, €132 million less than the originally targeted €9.5 billion. In total, the level of public funding for universities in 2024–2025, compared to the 2022 forecasts, was approximately €550 million lower than set in the 2022 Budget Act. Over the same two-year period, universities faced increased fixed expenses (primarily salaries) estimated at over €600 million. Taking inflation into account, this means that public universities had to cut back their activities by more than €1 billion in 2024–2025, which equates to about 6% of turnover, and that they had to make cuts in staff and investments.⁵³

The discussions in relation to the budget situation of Italian universities indicate that while the academic community is involved in debates that have an impact on policies affecting the university and research sectors, the policy changes and funding cuts introduced in 2024 constitute a severe threat to the universities' funding and staffing autonomy, restricting the flexibility and total capacity to mobilise resources (human, material, and economic).

Italian academia is also characterised by deteriorating working conditions, including uncompetitive staff salaries and threats to job security. As a result, the academic profession is less attractive in Italy than in most other EU Member States (Civera et al., 2023).

A reform seen by the academic community as a contributing factor to the deteriorating working conditions in academia in Italy is the transition from research positions funded by research grants to a new framework where research contracts are the main tool for recruiting academic staff (Modifiche al decreto legislativo n. 36 del 30 aprile 2022, 2022).⁵⁴ The new research contract aims to provide greater predictability and certainty for researchers hired by universities, and to guarantee better contract terms. The new contracts have a fixed term of two years and can be extended once (two years), with a possible extension of another year. Working conditions and salary levels are subject to collective bargaining at the national level. However, the contracts have been widely criticised for

⁵² Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (PNRR). For the original PNRR Plan, see <https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/PNRR.pdf>

⁵³ See: <https://dottorato.it/content/sogno-duna-notte-di-fine-estate-rapporto-adi-sul-fondo-di-finanziamento-ordinario-ffo-2025>

⁵⁴ Various academic groups, such as the Italian Economic Society (Società italiana di economia, 2025) and the Italian Society for Neuroscience (see: <https://www.sins.it/an-open-letter-on-the-future-of-young-researchers-in-italy/>) have sent open letters to the government about the negative impact of the reform. See also the letter from signed by over a 100 academics in total (Cossu, et al., 2025; de Luca, et al., 2025; Musarò, 2025)

their poor implementation and lack of alignment with the realities of academia. The two-year fixed-term framework is described as rigid and incompatible with annual/flexible project periods and funding instruments. Moreover, a specific project initiative is required, which limits the possibility for open calls or researchers to submit their own project proposals. This would negatively impact their academic freedom. Furthermore, salaries resulting from the new research contracts will be taxed, unlike previous agreements that used research grants. Moreover, these agreements would entail additional costs for universities. While the tax issue itself is not a problem, the implementation of the new research contracts is not accompanied by additional government funding. The salaries are not compatible with additional funding sources, which further limits researchers' salary levels. There are concerns that, under deteriorating levels of public funding, the new research contracts could lead to a significant reduction in scientific productivity and capacity, and could further reduce Italy's attractiveness for international young researchers.

To address this situation, in the spring of 2025 the Minister of University and Research presented a plan to make the Italian university education and research system more attractive to researchers currently working abroad. The plan consists of several phases, each supported by a separate budget. The first phase, with a budget of €50 million, consists of a call for young researchers who have completed a European Research Council (ERC)-funded project outside Italy and are interested in continuing their research in Italy (Il Sole 24 ORE, 2025). Unlike academics employed through the new research contracts mentioned above, researchers who successfully apply for this funding will be able to carry out their own project proposals. By the end of 2025, the government was preparing budget proposals for the next phases of the plan.

Further, there are indications that the current government is attempting to increase its control over the higher education and research sector which might lead to direct interference with academic freedom. This is argued to be part of the university reform that is expected to be discussed by Parliament before the end of 2026, as part of the national Stability Law. In the university reform, the government intends to have its representatives in all university boards of directors and introduce government control over the National agency for the evaluation of universities and research (ANVUR⁵⁵). The proposed reform would, for example, limit the autonomy of ANVUR, which would jeopardise its membership in European evaluation organisations. Such a membership is a prerequisite for the accreditation of medical specialisation courses, for participation in joint qualifications at the European level, and for ANVUR to be entrusted with evaluation tasks by university systems in other countries. These elements of the university reform are argued to resemble the Hungarian government's strategy for taking over the control of the public university sector⁵⁶. It remains to be seen how the universities' leadership and the academic community respond to this proposed university reform, and whether its implementation will indeed be part of a governmental strategy to strengthen its control over the university and research sectors. If the proposed reform is accepted by Parliament, it might have a serious impact on academic freedom.

Institutional leadership and management

There are worries about the state of self-governance in Italian universities. This is related to developments in institutional governance structures in the form of a growing concentration of decision-making authority over academic matters, such as research management and personnel policy, in the hands of institutional leaders and managers at both central and decentralised levels within universities.

During the monitoring period of this study, cases of academic misconduct were also identified (Radio Colonna, 2025). For example, an investigation at the University of Cassino uncovered a

⁵⁵ L'Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione del sistema Universitario e della Ricerca

⁵⁶ See: <https://www.roars.it/allarme-universita-e-ora-di-mobilitarsi/>

network that allowed students to receive answers to exam questions and guarantee top grades in exchange for large sums of money. Another case concerns animal welfare at the Magna Graecia University of Catanzaro (Musolino, 2025).

Academic community

The available information sources did not reveal any specific concerns or infringements of academic freedom from the academic community itself during the monitoring period. Studies such as those referred to in the chapters on Belgium and Finland were not available for Italy. For getting a more comprehensive understanding of the potential impact of specific actions from within the academic community on academic freedom in Italy, and the extent to which this leads, e.g. to self-censorship, additional empirical research is needed.

Societal actors

During the monitoring period for this study, a number of cases of academics exposed to pressure from society and political forces on social and political issues regarded as important were identified. The current government has, for example, been accused of using defamation laws to silence certain intellectual voices, including academics (Oltermann and Tondo, 2024). While the cases in question ended before they could proceed to trial, they arguably set a negative precedent for the use of the court system by political forces to achieve a chilling effect on critical academics. An open letter in support of one of the accused academics was signed by 1259 members of the academic community, while stating that they do not share with this academic's political position, characterised the lawsuit as an attack on free speech (Anderson, 2024).

In September 2024, the Standing Committee on Culture, Science, and Education of the Chamber of Deputies⁵⁷ adopted a resolution describing gender theory as unscientific and political propaganda, asserting the need to preserve the 'neutrality' of educational institutions and preventing the political indoctrination of children (La VII Commissione, 2024). After the adoption of the resolution (Zunino, 2025), inspections of educational institutions were authorised by the then Minister of University and Research, arguing that a balance had to be found between freedom of education and the protection of other values. The political development was condemned by the academic community in a letter signed by over 200 academics and journalists (121 Writers, 2025), with opposition politicians describing it as an attack on both universities and the LGBTQ+ community (La Repubblica, 2024). The inspections were subsequently cancelled.

Private sector actors

In the monitoring period the available sources of information did not reveal any specific worries about or infringements on academic freedom by private sector actors. However, for getting a comprehensive understanding of the possible impact on academic freedom in Italy of specific actions of private sector actors additional empirical research would be necessary.

Security policies and foreign interference⁵⁸

Italy is implementing the European Commission's recommendations to strengthen security and vigilance of sensitive and dual-use research areas at national level (European Commission, 2024), and is working towards a national action plan for assessing and addressing risks associated with cross-border scientific collaboration. An inter-ministerial committee with representatives from the academic community and research infrastructure surveyed all Italian universities and research institutions, finding a strong interest in developing measures and frameworks for identifying and mitigating risks related to research security. At the end of 2024, a national action plan was

⁵⁷ This is the lower house of the Italian Parliament; see: https://en.camera.it/4?scheda_informazioni=11

⁵⁸ See also the discussion on foreign interference from China in Italian academia in chapter 4 of this report.

presented, emphasizing the strategic principle of 'as open as possible, as closed as necessary', and underlining the importance of essential elements of academic freedom and the freedom of scientific research (Palazzo Chigi, 2022). The key ideas forwarded in the announcement of the plan have yet to manifest in a concrete national action plan. However, the government already adopted a national traffic light system for assessing new and ongoing research projects, with the academic community involved in its development (Decode39, 2024; Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca, 2024). The current developments do not constitute a direct threat or challenge to de facto academic freedom in Italy, but the increased coupling between research and national security issues warrants closer and continued monitoring.

Conclusion

While formal protections for academic freedom are generally maintained, there are concerns about the development of academic freedom in the current political climate. Overall, the study shows that direct and indirect political interference is considered the greatest threat to academic freedom in Italy. Indirect interference concerns restrictions on institutional autonomy, obstacles to academic self-governance, and deteriorating labour conditions and public funding practices. Direct political interference in academic freedom has not been an issue in Italy so far. However, there are indications that the university reform, expected to be passed by parliament in 2026, is aimed at increasing government control over higher education and the research sector, with potentially significant negative consequences for academic freedom. In this development, the question can be raised whether the university leadership, together with the academic community, can stop the reform and its possible consequences for academic freedom.

3.6.4. Poland

Introduction

Previous studies commissioned by the EP Academic Freedom Monitor have revealed serious concerns about the state of academic freedom in Poland. Some even feared that the Polish universities would undergo the same structural violations of academic freedom as the Hungarian university system (Craciun et al., 2024). The downward trend in respect for academic freedom was largely the result of political interference by the government of the time, which, as part of its political strategy, promoted national identity, the Catholic faith, and conservative values. This strategy led to a wave of political interventions in academic freedom since 2015, particularly targeting politically sensitive areas such as Holocaust studies and recent Polish history, as well as gender studies, queer studies, family studies, and related topics (Bucholc, 2022, p. 119).

Under the current government, in power since December 2023, the de facto state of academic freedom has been strengthened. A different, less negative public narrative prevails regarding the role and position of academia in society. Less emphasis is placed on national identity, and Catholic and conservative values. Moreover, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education no longer interferes directly with institutional affairs and academic freedom on a political or ideological basis. This positive trend is reflected in the 2025 AFI score (Kinzelbach, et al., 2025). A related indication of the positive development in the Polish society is media freedom. In 2015, when PiS first formed a government, Poland's rank in the World Press Freedom Index was 18, which dropped to rank 64 in the 2021 Index (23rd amongst EU countries). In 2025, Poland was ranked 31st (17th among EU Member States) (Reporters Without Borders, 2025). The level of media freedom is important for the ability of academia to disseminate research findings to the general public (Bucholc, 2022, 131).

However, there are continuing tensions in some areas between the current government and the party that formed the previous government (PiS), due to opposition from within the institutional structures built up during the PiS term in office and from the veto-power of the PiS-aligned president. In addition, there have been important disagreements within the diverse ruling coalition forming the current government (Bill and Stanley, 2025, 16). This has led to political inertia, with

several announced reforms in higher education and research stalling or not being completed. This means that the Polish situation regarding academic freedom is in a transitional period, in the sense that there is some cautious improvement, but the situation is not as positive as hoped. At the same time, the current government has continued several key initiatives introduced by the previous government through the Act of 20 July 2018, Law on Higher Education and Science. This includes the 'Excellence Initiative – Research University' programme, which aims to improve the quality of scientific research conducted at the best Polish universities⁵⁹.

Given especially the current political polarisation in Poland, it is difficult to estimate how academic freedom in the country will develop in the coming years. From that perspective, the overview of developments in academic freedom in Poland presented here serves as a snapshot. The transitional phase Poland is experiencing is also relevant for the rest of the EU, since it contributes to our understanding of the dilemmas of post-illiberal reform that may also confront other democracies in Europe (Bill and Stanley, 2025). It is therefore important to closely monitor developments in academic freedom in the country in the coming years.

Political interference

The current situation regarding de facto academic freedom in Poland can be seen as a cautious improvement under the new government. As described in the 2023 EP Academic Freedom Monitor report (Craciun et al., 2024), the previous government targeted academics and institutions that were particularly vocal in their criticism of the party's ideology, for example, by politicising public funding and evaluation processes, and also by using public intimidation (Bill and Stanley, 2025).

Under the current government, there are no indications of direct interference with academic freedom, while the government largely respects institutional autonomy. However, academic self-governance is not fully realised, particularly with regard to student involvement.

While the current government has implemented some reforms relevant to restoring academic freedom, significant progress has not been made in certain key areas. The Polish higher education and science system still suffers from relatively low levels of public funding, which affects academic labour conditions and the attractiveness of a career in science⁶⁰. In response to this situation, the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education adopted a regulation providing for a 30% increase in the minimum basic salaries for academic staff at public universities as of January 1, 2024⁶¹.

In addition, there is criticism from the academic community about the government's plan to reform the structure of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN). Although the PAN reform is long overdue, disagreements over the government's reform proposals revolve around the government's goal to democratising the academy, while critics argue that the reform is aimed at giving the government more control.⁶² There are also concerns about PAN's financial situation.

The improvement in de facto academic freedom is largely due to the government ceasing its open attacks on academics and academic institutions, and to progress made in restoring the independence of the public media and the judiciary (Freedom House, 2025a). However, reform efforts have faced political and institutional resistance, both within the institutional structures established during the previous government, and from the President himself, who has blocked

⁵⁹ See: <https://www.gov.pl/web/science/the-excellence-initiative---research-university-programme>

⁶⁰ See: Eurostat: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/SEPDF/cache/100103.pdf>; and Statistics Poland, file:///C:/Users/peterma/Downloads/research_and_experimental_development_in_poland_in_2024.pdf.

⁶¹ See: <https://www.gov.pl/web/nauka/podwyzki-dla-nauczycieli-akademickich--rozporzadzenie-podpisane>

⁶² See: <https://sciencebusiness.net/news/research-and-innovation-gap/academics-push-back-against-moves-put-polish-academy-sciences>

several key reform laws⁶³. Among these was a bill aimed at closing higher education and research institutes opened by the previous government⁶⁴. Although conditions have improved, political inertia and the lack of coordination between the government and the presidency are making the reform processed slow and incomplete. As Bill and Stanley (2025, p. 24) argue in their analysis of the challenges facing the current Polish government in implementing its reform agenda, 'legally irreproachable reforms seemed increasingly necessary they were also increasingly implausible as the enmity between the two halves of Poland's executive deepened'.

The election of PiS-aligned President Nawrocki in 2025 raises concerns for continued vetoes of reform attempts by the current government. Concerns about the president's involvement include his role in awarding full professorships based on the recommendation of the Council for Academic Excellence. Although this role of the president does not include assessing the merits of candidates, several researchers recommended by the Council for Academic Excellence have waited in vain for the president's confirmation (Bucholc, 2022, 123). This concerns researchers whose academic work is considered controversial from the PiS perspective.

Institutional leadership and management

In recent years, reforms have been introduced to modernise university governance. As part of these reforms the mandate of the university rectors has been amended. In recent leadership elections various 'new generation' rectors have come to the fore. Also the 'Excellence Initiative – Research University' programme⁶⁵ has contributed to the modernisation of Polish university leadership and governance.

Like in other EU Member States, there have been student pro-Palestinian protests that led to tensions between the student activists and the University leadership, for example, at the University of Warsaw⁶⁶, as discussed in more detail in the next section.

Academic community

There were indications that Poland's political polarisation has also reached the academic world. For example, current discussions about the position of Polish higher education institutions regarding the Gaza-Israel conflict and the current government approach to governing and reforming the higher education sector clearly indicate that there is a potential for far-reaching polarisation within the Polish academic community. The issue of academic collaboration with Israeli institutions has created divisions within the academic community. In 2024, an open letter addressed to the rector of the Jagiellonian University (UJ) signed by over 2800 academics called for the boycott of Israeli universities, organisations, and research institutions⁶⁷. Close to 500 academics, students, and Jewish leaders in Poland signed a letter against boycotting, arguing for a dialogue-based approach to mediating academic collaborations with Israeli partners⁶⁸. Tensions around this issue also emerged in relation to the decision of the University of Warsaw (UW) to disperse student protestors on campus by using police forces. The UW leadership and senate defended their actions (Nowak, 2024;

⁶³ See: <https://notesfrompoland.com/2025/07/31/a-divisive-legacy-andrzej-dudas-decade-as-polands-president/>

⁶⁴ See: <https://notesfrompoland.com/2025/08/05/polish-president-vetoes-two-laws-on-final-day-in-office/#:~:text=In%20May%2C%20the%20government%20approved,of%20the%20Polish%2Dborn%20astronomer>

⁶⁵ See: <https://www.gov.pl/web/science/the-excellence-initiative---research-university-programme#:~:text=The%20aim%20of%20the%20IDUB,international%20importance%20of%20their%20work.>

⁶⁶ See: <https://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/7,54420,31061544,ректор-uw-ktory-wezwal-policje-do-protestujacych-studentow.html>; see also: <https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/06/12/rector-calls-in-police-to-remove-pro-palestine-protesters-at-university-of-warsaw/>

⁶⁷ See: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QszcMr4BzzY6yu7T5-WxJJbNGJC4FeZ3mPvYeQFpY-8/edit?tab=t.0>

⁶⁸ See <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/list-otwarty-przeciwko-bojkotowi-instytucji-akademickich-w-izraelu-dokument/snk432r>

UW Press Office, 2024; UW Senate, 2024) in response to criticism from the Institute of Applied Polish Studies at UW (Chalupnik, et al., 2024) and the Polish Sociological Association (2024). The Polish Ombudsman's Office commented on the case and the contested and polarising atmosphere of the protests and surrounding debates (Starzewski, 2024).

These connections between polarising trends in society and academia can be further illustrated by recent higher education reform proposals and the responses to them within the academic community (Dixon, 2024). One proposal concerns the closure of the Copernicus Academy, which was established in 2022 under the previous PiS government. At its establishment the Copernicus Academy was seen as mirroring the Polish Academy of Sciences. Creating mirror organisations as competition for existing ones was used as a strategy by the previous Polish government (Leszczyński, 2021; Bucholc, 2022, p. 133). Parliament approved in July 2025 a bill introduced by the current government to close the Copernicus Academy because it is 'largely duplicating tasks already implemented by other institutions'. However, in his final day in office, the Polish president vetoed the bill⁶⁹. This means that the Academy of Sciences and the Copernicus Academy will continue to operate alongside each other, with the latter originally targeting academics who are 'friendly' to the PiS party's political agenda, and the former employing 'a number of public intellectuals who have criticised the PiS government and been targeted by pro-PiS government media' (Bucholc, 2022, p. 133). Furthermore, the government proposals to reform the Polish Academy of Sciences⁷⁰, the reform of the research assessment system proposed by the Academy of Sciences (Dixon, 2025), and the dismissal of the rector of the University of the National Education Commission in Krakow (UKEN) (Forum Akademickie, 2025a, 2025b) all receive support and criticism in the Polish academic community. The need to reform the Polish higher education and science system is acknowledged⁷¹. However, the arguments for and against specific reform proposals and measures of the current government reflect divisions within the Polish academic community over the issues addressed in the government's reform agenda and how these reforms should be implemented. On that last point, the current government appears to be faced with a choice between adhering to liberal legal requirements, which often have limited consequences, as the president's vetoes demonstrate, or taking more assertive action, with the risk that some of it could be legally questionable or even unlawful (Bill and Stanley, 2025, p. 21).

Societal actors

As discussed above, there were indications that the political polarisation that characterises Poland also has consequences for the academic community and academic freedom. However, during the monitoring period, the available information sources did not reveal any specific concerns or infringements of academic freedom by societal actors. Recent survey studies, such as those referred to in the chapters on Belgium and Finland, were not available for Poland. To gain a more complete picture of possible attacks on academic freedom by societal actors in Poland and the extent to which this leads, for example, to undue self-censorship, additional empirical research is needed.

Private sector actors

During the monitoring period, available information sources did not reveal any specific concerns or infringements of academic freedom by private sector actors⁷². However, for getting a more

⁶⁹ See: footnotes 50 and 51.

⁷⁰ See: <https://sciencebusiness.net/news/research-and-innovation-gap/academics-push-back-against-moves-put-polish-academy-sciences>

⁷¹ See, e.g.: <https://pan.pl/en/nauka-dla-przyszlosci-nowa-strategia-rozwoju-badan-naukowych-w-polsce/#header-2>

⁷² See also the draft report by the special rapporteur of the UN on academic freedom in Poland: [https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ohchr.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ohchr.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2F)

complete understanding of the possible impact on academic freedom in Poland of specific actions of private sector actors additional empirical research would be needed.

Security policies and foreign interference

Regarding national security, the situation in Poland is strongly influenced by its geographical location. For example, more than one million Ukrainian refugees reside in Poland, and most universities have Ukrainian staff and students. Poland's government budget also reflects growing geopolitical tensions, with the country's military spending expected to rise to almost 5% of GDP, the highest among NATO member states. This limits the government's budgetary flexibility, which also has consequences for higher education. Poland is also one of the strongest proponents of including dual-use technologies in the next EU framework programme⁷³, which is reflected in the Polish national R&D policies and programmes. This approach appears to enjoy broad support within the academic community; at least, no major criticisms or debates on this topic have emerged from the available sources.

Conclusion

Poland is in a transitional period regarding academic freedom. The current government, in power since 2023, has introduced various reform proposals aimed at strengthening Polish democratic institutions, including higher education and science institutions. These reforms were introduced, amongst other things, to strengthen the protection of academic freedom, which was weakened under the previous government. However, many of these reforms have stalled since the government lacks a constitutional majority and needs to work with an uncooperative president (Bill and Stanley, 2025, p. 21). Nonetheless, overall the state of academic freedom in the country is relatively positive (Kinzelbach et al., 2025), without indications of direct political interference or serious threats to academic freedom by other actors. At the same time, there have been no recent national survey studies on the state of academic freedom, so there is insufficient evidence to claim, for example, that there is no online harassment of academics and academic institutions in Poland. It can therefore be recommended that the universities jointly with other organisations and bodies, initiate a study on possible threats to academic freedom from societal actors and from within the academic community, as conducted in several other EU Member States.

2Fdocuments%2Fissues%2Feducation%2Fcfis%2Fcfi-expression%2Fsubm-academic-freedom-nhri-commissioner-hr-poland.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK

⁷³ See: <https://sciencebusiness.net/news/fp10/poland-supports-funding-dual-use-technologies-eus-next-research-programme>

4. Thematic analysis of academic freedom trends in the EU

4.1. Introduction

In this year's EP Academic Freedom Monitor study four trends in academic freedom in the EU were selected for more in-depth analysis. The first two concern trends in academic freedom that emerged from this year's updated synthesis of academic freedom measurements and the four country studies, and that have emerged or intensified in the EU over the past 12 to 18 months: the potential impact of political polarisation on academic freedom and the decline in respect for academic freedom in the US. The other two trends were identified as highly topical and relevant in the 2023 and 2024 EP Academic Freedom Monitor studies: the potential impact on academic freedom of university-private sector collaborations (analysed from a legal-conceptual perspective), and foreign interference and academic freedom (with a focus on the People's Republic of China – PRC).

We begin by presenting two emerging trends. The updated synthesis and the four country case studies utilize various methods, including desk research and interviews with experts and stakeholders in the four selected EU Member States⁷⁴. In the interviews, respondents were asked, among other things, to identify important trends in academic freedom that have emerged or intensified in their country over the past 12 to 18 months. Of the new or intensifying trends identified on the basis of the updated synthesis and the four country case studies the research team selected the two mentioned above as among the most urgent ones. We will start with discussing the potential impact of political polarisation on academic freedom, followed by a discussion of the decline in respect for academic freedom in the US and its possible impact on academic freedom in the EU.

The thematic study on the commercialisation on academia focuses specifically on the influences of university – private sector collaborations and analyses them from a legal perspective. Drawing on existing academic literature and (comparative) legal sources, the study first conceptualises academic freedom in the context of university – private sector collaborations. It then discusses what aspects of academia freedom may be affected; the respective right-holders and duty-bearers; the permissible limits to academic freedom and possible justifications of an interference as well as potential obligations resting on the state to protect it. The objective is to highlight that, while such collaborations can be beneficial, they may at times lead to subtle interferences with academic freedom. The study draws attention to the need for organisational and procedural safeguards that could mitigate and prevent them.

The thematic analysis on foreign interference and academic freedom is organised into three main segments. The first examines the conceptual definitions of foreign interference and foreign influence, drawing on a text-based analysis of existing academic literature. The second presents a case study of entities from the People's Republic of China, assessing their potential threat to higher education institutions and academic freedom. The third segment turns to specific EU Member States: the first part analyses interactions between higher education institutions and PRC entities, while the second part considers measures adopted to protect against or respond to foreign threats to academic freedom. The selection of case study countries is based on the availability of data, covering all geographies of the EU and on widespread awareness of foreign interference in higher education, which differs significantly across countries, both within academic circles and the broader public.

⁷⁴ See chapter 2 and Annex 1 in this report.

4.2. Political polarisation and academic freedom

Over the past 10 to 15 years, many European countries have witnessed a democratic backsliding, increasing violations of the rule of law, and growing political polarisation (see e.g. Liberties, 2025). The potential impact of this polarisation on trust in science and the protection of academic freedom can be illustrated by a recent survey in the Netherlands on voters' views on democracy and the political climate in the country. One overall conclusion is that left-right polarisation paralyses Dutch politics (Koppel and Heck, 2025). When considering the position of science in society, this polarisation becomes evident in the response to the question of whether the government should base policy on scientific advice from experts, even when such advice lacks majority support among voters, or whether it should instead follow the will of the people, even when this goes against the advice from scientific experts. There is a significant difference in the response to the statement among the population: right-wing conservative voters prefer the will of the people, while left-wing progressive voters prefer scientific advice (Koppel and Heck, 2025, p. 14).

The growing differences in political preferences among voters are also generally reflected in attitudes towards academia, as shown by the EU barometer on European citizens' knowledge and attitudes towards science and technology⁷⁵. While general confidence in the positive impact of science and technology on society remains very high among EU citizens, a growing proportion of EU citizens believe that science is changing our way of life too quickly and that the applications of science and technology could threaten human rights. Moreover, the barometer indicates that there is a great deal of scepticism about the extent to which scientists can be trusted. For example, just over half of EU citizens (52%) agree with the statement that 'because of their knowledge, scientists have a power that makes them dangerous'. The agreement with this statement has increased 6% since 2021. Finally, around 60% of the respondents indicate that they agree with the statement that science and technology could improve everyone's lives but mostly improve the lives of people who are already better off.

This scepticism among a large part of EU citizens towards scientists and the feeling that science only benefits those who are already better off in society can be seen as an indication that there might also be a potential breeding ground for the rise of anti-science in Europe (Hotez, 2023). The anti-science movement emerged in the US from anti-vaccination groups during the COVID-19 pandemic and, as Hotez⁷⁶ (2023) discusses, has since been on the rise in many countries around the world. In the polarised political climate of many EU Member States, attacks on the science system, particularly in sensitive research areas such as climate change, gender studies, migration, and vaccines, are becoming increasingly common. Academics are then targeted with surveillance, criticism, political attacks, or even physical threats⁷⁷.

Overall, the possible impact of political polarisation on academic freedom manifests itself in the following ways:

⁷⁵ See: Special Eurobarometer 557. European citizens' knowledge and attitudes towards science and technology, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3227?etrans=pt>

⁷⁶ Peter Hotez is a renowned scientist, professor of paediatrics and molecular virology and microbiology at Baylor College of Medicine, where he is the codirector of the Texan Children's Center for Vaccine Development. While Hotez' analysis of the rise of anti-science is focused on the US, he discusses, among other things, also the role of the Orban government in the rise of anti-science in the US. As argued by Hotez (2023, p. 115), 'a new global alliance might unfold between political extremists and conservatives in the United States and the autocrats in Hungary. Among other things, they are bound by a common grievance against science and scientists'.

⁷⁷ See, e.g. Oksanen et al. (2022), Verhaeghe (2023), and Tovatt et al. (2024).

- Growing disagreement between political parties over higher education and research policies, including government funding policies⁷⁸. In Italy and the Netherlands, for example, right-wing governments have implemented policies on higher education and research that differ sharply from the policies of the previous government. In both countries, the previous government had significantly increased budgets for higher education and science and promoted the central role of science in national economic competitiveness and social justice policies. The new governments decided from the outset to drastically reduce public investment in the academic sector and to deprioritise higher education and research in their government programs. As a result, the academic sector in both countries faced a serious lack of stability and predictability when it came to political guidance. Moreover, the level of funding under the right-wing government is clearly insufficient to contribute to the 'European way of life' in the way promoted by the European Commission⁷⁹.
- The tendency among politicians across the political spectrum of EU Member States to become more demanding and controlling of the academic sector. This is at least partly a response by moderate politicians to the growing popularity of populist parties and their criticism of the perceived elitist nature and political bias of contemporary science and academic experts. In practice, this means that politicians are increasingly inclined to demand usefulness and compliance from academia. Whether this is done by concentrating funding, infrastructure, and academic staff resources on specific research areas, such as Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) or artificial intelligence, or by demanding the closure of 'useless' programs, in all cases this can restrict institutional autonomy and erode academic freedom⁸⁰.

4.3. The decline in respect for academic freedom in the US and its potential consequences for the EU

Previous EP Academic Freedom Monitor studies have shown that foreign interference is a growing threat to academic freedom in the EU. At European, national, and institutional levels, foreign interference in academia has already led to specific measures and guidelines, for example, for scientific cooperation with China, while scientific cooperation with Russia and Belarus was largely halted as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since early 2025, a relatively new threat of foreign interference has emerged, stemming from the new US administration's higher education and science policies.

The following elements of the US federal administration's higher education and science policy since January 2025 have a potential impact on academic freedom in the EU:

⁷⁸ See also the 2024 EP Academic Freedom Monitor report for a discussion of the German political party AfD's programme at the federal level in the areas of education, science and research (Maassen, et al., 2025, p. 72)

⁷⁹ See closing speech by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen at the 'Choose Europe for Science' event at La Sorbonne, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/speech_25_1130

⁸⁰ See, for example, the discussion of the election manifestos of the political parties participating in the elections in the Netherlands (on 29 October 2025) for the House of Representatives, e.g. when it comes to the parties' intentions and plans with respect to funding degree programmes and academic freedom, <https://www.erasmusmagazine.nl/en/2025/10/22/dit-is-wat-de-partijen-na-de-verkiezingen-willen-met-hoger-onderwijs-en-onderzoek/>

- The 'Executive order' (January 21) entitled: Ending illegal discrimination and restoring merit-based opportunity⁸¹.
- The significant reduction in the capacity of the federal civil service and the drastic cuts in government spending.
- The implementation of the political agenda of the federal administration.

4.3.1. Ending Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) policies and practices

The Executive Order of 21 January 2025 states that,

“.. public institutions have adopted and actively use dangerous, demeaning, and immoral race- and sex-based preferences under the guise of so-called “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI) or “diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility” (DEIA) that can violate the civil-rights laws of this Nation.”

The executive order put significant pressure on American universities, research institutes, and government agencies to end all DEI activities. Moreover, international collaborators (particularly academics and institutions) were pressured in various ways to adapt to the order. In practice, this meant that several European academics and academic institutions were also ordered to cease all DEI activities as a condition for further collaboration with US partners and (possible) funding from the US federal government. The instructions were sent to individual academics and institutions (universities and research institutes) in a number of EU Member States. The means used or threatened were mainly cuts in government funding and threats of further measures in the event of non- or insufficient compliance.

The impact of the Executive Order so far has been

- Almost complete end of DEI policies and practices at US universities
- Discussion on negative aspects of DEI practices at US universities
- Complete end to DEI practices at US research policy agencies
- Review of research grants at NSF/NIH and the freezing/termination of a number of such grants that were (allegedly) related to diversity, gender, or other 'politically undesirable' topics
- Seemingly arbitrary punishment of universities, including the dismissal of university presidents
- Threats to academic freedom in the US, for example in the form of increased self-censorship
- Unrest, resistance, compliance from international partners (e.g. Finland) and (some) protests from governments (e.g. Belgium).

4.3.2. Significant reduction in federal civil service capacity and cuts in government spending

The establishment of the 'Department of Government Efficiency' (DOGE) in January 2025 was aimed at reducing federal government expenditures, particularly through a radical reduction in the capacity of the federal civil service. DOGE used its mandate to 'take over' federal ministries and agencies, force massive layoffs of federal civil servants, implement massive budget cuts for federal ministries and agencies, (illegally) seize and use public data, such as student loan records, and close some federal agencies. One of the consequences for US universities and colleges, and individual

⁸¹ See: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-illegal-discrimination-and-restoring-merit-based-opportunity/>

academics, is increasing uncertainty, including about the possibilities for initiating or continuing international academic collaboration.

An example of a science policy agency potentially affected is the National Science Foundation (NSF)⁸². The President's Budget Request for 2026 for the NSF proposes to cut the NSF budget⁸³ by 56.9%. Some of the measures proposed would imply massive cuts to student/young researcher grants and the mass cancellation of existing and contracted research funding agreements on anti-DEI and ideological grounds, for example in the humanities and social sciences, in the fields of climate change and biodiversity research, and in medical research, especially virology and vaccinology. Of potential far-reaching implications for the future of the American science system and its attractiveness as a collaborative partner is the announcement that the central role of academic peer review in selecting funding proposals will be ended and that instead, the final decision on grants will be 'in the hands of senior appointees, including cabinet secretaries, named by the president' (Greenfield, 2025a, 2025b)⁸⁴.

Another science policy institution potentially affected is the National Institutes of Health (NIH)⁸⁵. The US Administration has proposed a 40% cut to the NIH budget for 2025 (out of a budget of \$46.8 billion). It also proposes terminating 1,800 research contracts. These proposals, however, have been rejected by Congress⁸⁶. Meanwhile, the NIH has made massive cuts to student and early-career research grants and proposed the closure of certain NIH institutes. In addition, the implementation of the new federal health policy and research agenda⁸⁷ includes the following:

- Firing all members of the government's advisory committee on vaccination practices and replacing them with people hand-picked by Secretary of Health and Human Services, including vaccine skeptics.
- Firing the director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) less than a month into her tenure⁸⁸.
- A \$500 million cut in funding for mRNA vaccine research.

⁸² See: <https://www.nsf.gov/>. Accessed 20 October 2025 the website of the NSF contained the following notice: 'due to a lapse in appropriations, NSF is closed. NSF will continue to accept proposals in accordance with published guidelines. Please continue to watch this site for changes to NSF's operating status, reopening guidance for employees, and if necessary, general instructions for recipients'.

⁸³ The President's 2026 budget request to Congress for the NSF is \$3.9 billion, which is a \$5.2 billion (-56.9%) decrease from the 2025 budget, see: <https://www.nsf.gov/about/budget/fy2026>. However, Congress largely rejected these severe cuts and approved a bill providing a budget of \$8.75 billion for 2026 for the NSF. This is a 3.4% cut from the 2025 budget but far less than the cut proposed in the President's Budget Request; see <https://aas.org/posts/news/2026/01/congress-passes-fiscal-year-2026-pending-bills-nsf-nasa-and-doe>

⁸⁴ See also: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/08/improving-oversight-of-federal-grantmaking/>

⁸⁵ See: <https://www.nih.gov/>. Accessed 20 October 2025 the website of the NIH contained the following notice: 'Because of a lapse in government funding, the information on this website may not be up to date, transactions submitted via the website may not be processed, and the agency may not be able to respond to inquiries until appropriations are enacted'.

⁸⁶ US Congress approved a bill providing \$47.2 billion for the NIH's base budget in 2026. This funding level represents an increase of \$415 million (0.9%) compared to the 2025 NIH base budget. This bill rejects the 2026 President Budget Request, which proposed an \$18 billion cut to NIH, see: <https://www.acr.org/News-and-Publications/2026/congress-includes-increases-to-nih-in-fy2026-minibus>

⁸⁷ See, e.g. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2025/09/05/gezondheidsminister-robort-f-kennedy-breekt-het-vertrouwen-in-de-medische-wetenschap-stap-voor-stap-af-2-a4905207>

⁸⁸ According to her own interpretation, the director was dismissed for refusing to fire top scientists at the agency or pre-approve vaccine recommendations without first considering the relevant scientific data, while the responsible secretary stated that she had told him that she was not trustworthy, see: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-03179-1>

Other government agencies affected by proposed budget cuts and layoffs, the closure of whole research departments, and research data being taken offline or deleted from servers, include the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Department of Agriculture (USDA), and US Geological Survey (USGS). This has potential implications for the knowledge base in many areas, including climate change, renewable energy and biodiversity. The overall impact on universities, colleges and research institutes, as well as individual academics is continued uncertainty, institutional budget cuts and layoffs, a lack of prospects for early-career researchers, international research collaborations under pressure or terminated, brain drain, and violations of academic freedom. Also European researchers and academic institutions are potentially affected by research data being taken offline or deleted from servers in the US. This concerns in some cases data produced in joint US-European research projects, with joint budgets, partly covered by public funding from European or national research funding programmes. Consequently, access to data managed in the US has become a major concern. Developments in the US since January 2025 have provided significant impetus for discussions and policy proposals regarding European data sovereignty (Carrapico and Farrand, 2025)⁸⁹. However, as argued by Carrapico and Farrand (2025, p. 4), 'there is the potential for the EU's data sovereignty ambitions to be unrealised due to a gap between the EU's desires for autonomy and its ability to reduce external interdependencies'.

4.3.3. Implementation of a conservative agenda

The US government has attacked universities for their 'ideological indoctrination', an attack interpreted by some as 'an open warfare on higher education'⁹⁰. This includes criticism of universities for their 'anti-Semitism', their focus on climate change and renewable energy, and their 'woke' mentality. Universities are being punished with budget freezes, particularly in connection with pro-Palestinian demonstrations on campus. Harvard University is one of the primary targets of this campaign⁹¹, but other universities also seriously affected. For example, Stanford University has announced it will cut 360 jobs and reduce its budget by \$140 million in response to federal government cuts⁹². Another example is the 'freezing' of over \$300 million in funding for the University of California, Los Angeles, because the university is argued to have failed to prevent a hostile environment for Jewish and Israeli students⁹³.

On 1 October 2025, the US Administration sent a letter to nine universities⁹⁴ in which it introduced a 'Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education'⁹⁵ and promised preferential federal funding for those universities who would sign on to the Compact. The compact lists policy guidelines in eight policy areas, including equality of admissions, marketplace of ideas & civil discourse, institutional neutrality, financial responsibility, and foreign entanglements. Later that month, the

⁸⁹ See, e.g.: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/agenda/briefing/2025-10-06/3/promoting-and-protecting-digital-sovereignty-in-the-eu>

⁹⁰ See: <https://www.aaup.org/academe/issues/spring-2025/trump-revealing-our-higher-ed-crisis>

⁹¹ As argued by the New York Times, Harvard can be regarded to be 'The Trump administration's top target in its campaign to exert more control over higher education', with the university having 'roughly \$9 billion at stake in its fight with the federal government', see: <https://www.nytimes.com/article/trump-university-college.html>, and: <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/02/us/politics/trump-harvard-payment.html>

⁹² See: <https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2025/06/update-2025-2026-budget>

⁹³ See: <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-07-31/trump-freezes-nih-nsf-funding-ucla>

⁹⁴ The nine universities that received the letters were Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Virginia, the University of Arizona, the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Southern California (USC), Vanderbilt University, Dartmouth College, and Brown University.

⁹⁵ See: <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Compact-for-Academic-Excellence-in-Higher-Education-10.1.pdf>

Trump Administration invited all higher education to sign the compact⁹⁶. In essence, what the compact is representing is that the Trump Administration is offering funds to universities willing to promote conservative ideas.

Of the nine universities receiving the original letter, seven refused to sign the compact. The first university to reject it was MIT. In a letter addressed to the Education Secretary⁹⁷, MIT's president explained that MIT's values and practices already 'meet or exceed many of the standards set forth in the document', but also indicated disagreement with other provisions in the Compact, particularly those that 'limit freedom of expression and [MIT's] independence as an institution'. The criticism expressed by MIT is generally shared by the US academic community. Overall, the compact is seen as an attempt to expand the US Administration's control over higher education by offering a deal that would end the independence of universities. As argued in the Atlantic: 'The compact is the newest escalation in Trump's attempt to impose ideological dominance over America's world-class colleges and universities'.⁹⁸ The compact also offers insights potentially relevant to Europe into the further development of conservative ideas underlying the US government's attacks on its own higher education institutions in the sense that it outlines the potential preconditions the US government might impose on international scientific cooperation.

4.3.4. Possible impact on academic freedom in the EU

Although still in its early days, it can be argued that the potential impact of US government higher education and science policies on academic freedom in the EU has three components.

First, the pressure places on European research collaboration partners of US scholars to adhere to key elements of the executive order that aimed to end DEI policies may have a direct impact on academic freedom within the EU. For example, European researchers may feel pressured, for example for financial reasons, to align their DEI approaches with US requirements within collaborative US-European research projects. Moreover, academic freedom in the EU may be threatened by substantial cuts in federal US funding for academic activities in areas where US-EU collaboration is both well-established and crucial, such as climate change, vaccine research, and renewable energy. Both the US administration's new policy agendas and its US budget cuts could limit the ability of EU academics to pursue their own research interests in collaborative US-EU activities. This is because US-EU research collaboration is typically based on long-term agreements, a shared division of labour, and joint publications. Federal budget cuts, combined with the introduction of new conditions deemed unacceptable by European collaborators of US researchers, undermine these collaborations not on the basis of academic assessments of quality or innovation capacity, but rather because of underlying political ideas that threaten the individual academic freedom and institutional autonomy of the European academics and institutions involved.⁹⁹

Second, possible restrictions on data access in the US for European academics pose a particular problem. Since January 2025, changes in the US administration's science policy has resulted in research data in certain academic fields, such as climate change and women's health¹⁰⁰, being taken offline or deleted from servers in the US. In practice, this means that not only American researchers, but also their international collaborators will no longer have access to this data. In some cases, the

⁹⁶ See: <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/the-trump-agenda/trump-welcomes-any-institution-to-sign-onto-compact-outlining-his-priorities>

⁹⁷ See: <https://orgchart.mit.edu/letters/regarding-compact>

⁹⁸ See: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/10/higher-education-compact-trump-deal/684457/>

⁹⁹ See also the statement from ALLEA on Threats to Academic Freedom and International Research Collaboration in the United States, <https://allea.org/portfolio-item/allea-statement-on-threats-to-academic-freedom-and-international-research-collaboration-in-the-united-states/>

¹⁰⁰ See, e.g., <https://www.science.org/content/article/nih-cancels-its-first-and-largest-study-centered-women>

data in question were produced and managed with European co-funding. In the most extreme cases, European researchers are now unable to access their own data. Furthermore, the publication of joint US-European scientific articles and the organisation of joint scientific conferences and seminars is becoming increasingly difficult in some academic areas.

Third, the US government's new policies on higher education and science could serve as inspiration for politicians in EU Member States. This could mean that with the disappearance of the US government's protection and promotion of academic freedom, political support for academic freedom in the EU could also come under pressure, for example if the power position of political parties in Europe with anti-academic attitudes is further strengthened, e.g. in the framework of the implementation of the new US national security strategy (see next point).

Finally, on December 4, 2025, the Trump administration published its 2025 National Security Strategy¹⁰¹. While it is too early to assess the full impact of this strategy, its stated aim of promoting 'European Greatness', and its intention to 'cultivate resistance' within the continent to 'Europe's current trajectory', reveal an underlying diagnosis of Europe's problems, as stemming primarily from 'migration' and European integration. The proposed remedy includes the promotion of an illiberal political agenda for the continent in close cooperation with European political parties that adhere to this agenda¹⁰². Ultimately, this strategy may threaten the promotion and protection of European basic values, including academic freedom, not only within Europe, but also in European global science partnerships.

4.4. Academic–private sector collaboration as an aspect of the commercialisation of academia

This section focuses on the private sector's influence on academic freedom, particularly through funding relationships between the private sector and academic partners, as part of the issue of the commercialisation of academia.

In this, the term 'commercialisation of academia' builds on how this concept has been coined in the research project 'The EU fundamental right to 'freedom of the arts and sciences': exploring the limits on the commercialisation of academia' (AFITE). It builds upon different strands of literature and disciplines (Kosta, 2020). Commercialisation means accordingly that higher education institutions adopt market or market-like behaviours; that they are organised in accordance with corporate management principles (or New Public Management); or that the academic system is understood to essentially assume a functional role: to serve political and socio-economic interests. According to Slaughter and Leslie (2001, p. 154), market behaviours imply engagement in for-profit activities, whereas market-like behaviours 'refer to institutional and faculty competition for monies, whether these are from external grants and contracts, endowment funds, university–industry partnerships, institutional investment in professors' spin-off companies, student tuition and fees, or some other revenue-generating activity. What makes these activities market-like is that they involve competition for funds from external resource providers'.¹⁰³ Accordingly, 'commercialisation' includes, but is not limited to, collaborations between academia and the private sector through which external funding for academia is secured. As used here, the term 'commercialisation of

¹⁰¹ See: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

¹⁰² See, e.g., <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/dec/05/civilisational-erasure-us-strategy-document-appears-to-echo-far-right-conspiracy-theories-about-europe>

¹⁰³ See also: Kosta (2023)

academia' has a broader meaning than when 'commercialisation' refers to the process of 'translating cutting edge research into commercial activity'.¹⁰⁴

The notion of the 'private sector' can also be conceptualised in different ways. In this part of the study, the focus is primarily on collaborations between private business and industry with universities.

4.4.1. A legal-conceptual analysis of academic freedom in the context of university–private sector collaborations

The 'onion model' of academic freedom, introduced in the pilot study of the EP Academic Freedom Monitor (Kováts and Rónay, 2023, p. 12), identifies various essential and supportive elements of academic freedom. The essential elements of academic freedom include freedom of teaching, freedom of research, freedom to study, freedom of academic expression, and self-governance. Supportive elements of academic freedom encompass institutional autonomy, employment security and financial security. While this model constitutes only one conceptual framework of reference, out of many possible,¹⁰⁵ it provides a useful starting point to outline the possible dimensions of academic freedom that may be interfered with by academic–private partnerships in abstracto. Both 2023 and 2024 de facto studies of the EP Academic Freedom Monitor (Maassen, et al., 2023; Craciun, et al., 2024) have noted a general trend of public funding for higher education institutions being increasingly under pressure. Underfunding of the public higher education sector can be construed also as a legal academic freedom problem.¹⁰⁶ One of its potential consequences is an increase in private sector funding of academic and especially research activities in response to the decrease of the level of public funding. Although reliance on external (competitive), especially private, funding for teaching and research in public universities has in some cases been seen as problematic from the point of view of academic freedom,¹⁰⁷ collaborations with the private sector can be beneficial and do not amount per se to academic freedom violations (Aghion, et al., 2008) – as long as they comply with the applicable academic freedom legal standards as set out in national, EU, or international laws.¹⁰⁸

While no binding instrument of international law provides explicit protection of academic freedom, academic freedom can be partially protected under its various provisions¹⁰⁹ and is increasingly perceived as a self-standing human right, subject not only to direct interference but also more subtle manipulation.¹¹⁰ In the recent Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, focused on academic freedom, it is recognised that threats to academic freedom may result from the steering capacity of both public and private funding:

Methods of control are developed through public or private funding; the privatization, commodification, digitalization, platformization and assetization

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. J. Lerner, H. Manley, C. Stein, H. Williams, 'The commercialisation of university research: The role of people versus place, 1 Mar 2024, < <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/commercialisation-university-research-role-people-versus-place>>

¹⁰⁵ See, e.g. Matei and D'Aquila (2024).

¹⁰⁶ See the discussion below. See also Kosta and Ceran (2025, p. 59), which discusses with reference to the German legal order state obligations to provide 'financial means, including the basic necessary resources for conducting science'.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, Schimank and Hüther (2022); Doc. 15167 (16 Oct 2020), Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe, Threats to Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions in Europe (Report, Doc. 15167, 16 October 2020) <https://pace.coe.int/files/28749/html>.

¹⁰⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the various provisions, see Kosta and Ceran (2025).

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, the analysis in Beiter, Karran and Appiagyeyi-Atua (2016).

¹¹⁰ See: F. Shaheed, 'Academic freedom: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education' UN Doc A/HRC/56/58 (2024), paras 11, 46.

of education; and the support for specific students' organizations. As noted in one contribution, academic freedom is curtailed when universities seeking State resources and/or patronage enter into compromising relationships with people in power, resulting in a curious situation whereby academic freedom is suppressed with the apparent support of the academic establishment.¹¹¹

Therefore, one of the Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom accompanying the Report

recommends that States and, where relevant, other stakeholders ... [e]nsure adequate public funding of academic, research and teaching institutions as a way to foster academic freedom, ... ; simultaneously ensure that systems of financing, whether public or private, not-for-profit or for-profit, safeguard academic freedom and institutional autonomy from undue influence, pressure, restrictions or retaliation by sources of financial support; in particular, 'no influence' clauses should be systematically introduced into agreements between academic, research and teaching institutions and private funders or partners, as well as philanthropists, especially on research agendas and hiring practices; and corporate research contracts should be approved by the academic body of institutions and funding procedures should be fair and fully transparent;¹¹²

When a specific academic freedom case falls within the scope of European Union law, the applicable legal standard would be that enshrined in Article 13 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which explicitly protects academic and scientific freedom. The provision reads: 'The arts and scientific research shall be free of constraint. Academic freedom shall be respected'. According to the judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union in the case *Commission v Hungary*,¹¹³ the only existing judgment on academic freedom to date, academic freedom in EU law encompasses both an individual and an institutional dimension, as well as positive obligations incumbent on Member States.¹¹⁴ As commercialisation is increasingly recognised as a potential threat to academic freedom, and as approaches to the provision and regulation of academic funding increasingly diverge across the Member States, it is timely to reflect on the scope and meaning of Article 13 of the EU Charter in this context as well.¹¹⁵

4.4.2. Which aspects of academic freedom may be affected?

Collaboration with the private sector can benefit academia in many ways. For example, it can generate additional research funding, provide access to proprietary data that would otherwise not be easily available, or offer additional training opportunities for early career staff and students. However, depending on the form and circumstances, it can sometimes also lead to various forms of interference with academic freedom. Given that this section of the report focuses on such collaborations as a potential legal academic freedom problem, the following paragraphs outline these potential interferences in abstract terms. Whether these actually take place must be assessed in light of the specific circumstances and conditions of each collaboration.

From the perspective of the individual dimension of academic freedom, an important potential infringement concerns the freedom of research. By linking funding to certain substantive conditions, such as specific research questions or specific methods, private funders can shape academic

¹¹¹ *ibid* 46.

¹¹² *ibid* 84.

¹¹³ *Commission v Hungary* [C-66/18] [2020] ECLI:EU:C:2020:792.

¹¹⁴ For a comment on the case, see Kosta and Piqani (2022)

¹¹⁵ See Kosta (2023).

research in accordance with their commercial interests or other agendas rather than with the impartial search for truth (Barendt, 2010, p. 228). Academic freedom also includes the freedom to access all information needed to conduct research. In public–private partnerships, university researchers may be denied full access to data due to confidentiality clauses, privacy agreements, or similar restrictions. This may prevent them from fully validating research results and independently taking responsibility for their accuracy, as required by research ethics (Barendt, 2010, p. 227, 230, 234).

Because academic freedom also encompasses the dissemination of research results (in various forms), it can be compromised by unjustified delays or suppression of research results (Barendt, 2010, p. 227). Because delays often stem from commercial interests – such as gaining time to file a patent application – they can raise concerns if they are excessively long or intended to hide undesirable results. Furthermore, it has been argued that ownership of results – including patents – should be considered an aspect of academic freedom.¹¹⁶ This is because such intellectual property rights affect control over the dissemination of scholarly publications – a core element of individual academic freedom. This ties in with the broader debate about how intellectual property rights should be allocated between academics and their institutions (Davies, 2015).

Finally, collaboration with the private sector can also affect freedom of education and/or studying.¹¹⁷ This primarily concerns restrictions or pressure on the content of education (see also below on systemic concerns). Restrictions on use of research results arising from intellectual property rights may prevent their incorporation into educational activities (Gärditz, p. 41). While participation in privately sponsored research and teaching activities will often be attractive to students and young researchers, the value of such experiences may make them subject to the same restrictions as more experienced academics.¹¹⁸ Given their even more vulnerable position, it is therefore necessary to safeguard their academic interests in this context as well.

Private–public partnerships can also raise institutional or systemic concerns. The private sector may participate in establishing or managing public higher education or research institutions. While such cooperation can promote knowledge transfer and innovation, it may also narrow research and teaching agendas towards business and industry priorities.¹¹⁹ This is particularly so when the private sector is responsible for 'structural contributions'¹²⁰ to institutions and when institutions or individuals otherwise hold a 'significant financial interest'¹²¹ in such partnerships. Systemically, heavy reliance on private funding can pressure institutions to prioritise research that attracts such funding, often under the constraints discussed above (Barendt, 2010, p. 228).¹²² This problem is compounded when academic employment is contingent upon obtaining such external funds (McGaughey, 2022),

¹¹⁶ See, for example, American Association of University Professors (2014a).

¹¹⁷ While freedom to study (and to learn) has been conceptualised as part of academic freedom in the 'onion model' of academic freedom (Kováts and Zoltan Rónay, 2023, p. 12), its status as part of the legal concept of academic freedom remains underdiscussed. See also the findings and recommendations in Kosta and Ceran (2025).

¹¹⁸ American Association of University Professors (2014b, p 136).

¹¹⁹ See the latest trends analysis on Austria in Craciun et al. (2024, p. 132); Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe, Threats to Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions in Europe (Report, Doc. 15167, 16 October 2020) <https://pace.coe.int/files/28749/html>, para 32.

¹²⁰ Hugentobler et al. (2017, p. 203) define such contributions as 'private funding which constitutes a large part of the total resources of a university department and establishes research infrastructures on a long-term basis'.

¹²¹ American Association of University Professors (2014b).

¹²² See also: Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe, Threats to Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions in Europe (Report, Doc. 15167, 16 October 2020) <<https://pace.coe.int/files/28749/html>>; CoE Resolution 2352 (2020) pt 6.

with precarious forms of employment recognised at times as a separate academic freedom issue.¹²³ In the context of university–industry collaboration on curriculum design, such pressure may also extend to the educational activities of higher education institutions.¹²⁴ It can be noted that several soft law instruments on academic freedom emphasise the value of sufficient public funding and transparent rules on financing of the sector.¹²⁵

Given the potential dynamics of private–public partnerships, they can also serve as a channel for foreign interference. For example, research centres funded by foreign actors, including private companies, can '[enable] the spreading of propaganda, spread of disinformation and information manipulation and [facilitate] espionage' (European Commission, 2022). In joint research projects and similar undertakings, foreign private actors may also be able to manipulate research data, the research process, or conclusions, especially if university partners are not given full access to the data or all procedures.

4.4.3. Right-holders and duty-bearers

There is no universal agreement on who is entitled to academic freedom (Kováts and Ronáy, 2023, p. 11). Some interpret it as a right that belongs only to academics, with differing views on who is eligible, while others extend it to students, administrative staff or even lay people (ibid.). Comparative legal research shows that – depending on national terminology – academic freedom is often understood as applying within the higher education sector, while scientific freedom (or freedom of scientific research) is more broadly framed as 'everyone's freedom'.¹²⁶ Freedoms of students remain relatively underexplored, yet it is generally accepted that they enjoy academic or scientific freedoms when engaged in relevant teaching or research activities.¹²⁷ In such contexts, students could encounter interferences discussed above, particularly consequential if they concern their graduate research projects (CESAER, 2024). Furthermore, academic or scientific freedom protect also institutions, especially universities, though the exact scope of such protection may differ across different jurisdictions.¹²⁸

The state and its bodies are the principal duty-bearers in the context of academic freedom.¹²⁹ Public research or higher education institutions are therefore simultaneously right-holders (in relation to the state) and duty-bearers (in relation to individuals within them).¹³⁰ However, private–public partnerships may be legally challenging as constitutional or fundamental rights are seldom directly enforceable against private actors (horizontally) (Barendt, 2010, p 234). In other words, academics cannot typically sue a private company for violating their constitutional rights as such.

Horizontal application of constitutional provisions on academic freedom is generally excluded in the Member States analysed in the 2024 EP Academic Freedom Monitor de jure study (Kosta and Ceran, 2025). Dutch commentators have drawn attention to the responsibility of private funders and commissioners of research to respect academic freedom, but the enforceability of such duties

¹²³ E.g. 'Eurodoc Statement on Academic Freedom' (Eurodoc, 15 March 2023) <<https://eurodoc.net/news/2023/eurodoc-statement-on-academic-freedom>>. See also Section 4.3 in Ceran (forthcoming).

¹²⁴ While not framed in academic freedom terms, see the brief discussion of some fundamental tensions observed in such collaborations in Bari (2025).

¹²⁵ CoE Resolution 2352 (2020) pt 9.3.

¹²⁶ Kosta and Ceran (2025, pp. 80–82) and Ceran (forthcoming). See also section 1.2 in this report.

¹²⁷ Kosta and Ceran (2025, pp. 80–82); see also Ceran (forthcoming).

¹²⁸ Ibid. Furthermore, the institutional dimension of academic freedom has been confirmed by the Court of Justice in *Commission v Hungary* [C-66/18] [2020] ECLI:EU:C:2020:792.

¹²⁹ Kosta and Ceran (2025, pp 80–82); see also Ceran (forthcoming).

¹³⁰ Ibid.

remains uncertain.¹³¹ Nonetheless, under certain conditions, constitutional guarantees of academic or scientific freedoms may have indirect horizontal effect, shaping the interpretation of relevant rights and obligations in private relationships.¹³² Besides any hypothetical possibility of direct horizontal application of Article 13 CFR under EU legal doctrine on horizontal direct effect of fundamental rights, one could assume – albeit so far untested in practice – that the provision could have indirect horizontal effect also in EU law.¹³³

4.4.4. Permissible limits to academic freedom

Academic freedom is generally recognised as subject to limitations. In EU law, this is confirmed by Article 52(1) of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights that reads:

Any limitation on the exercise of the rights and freedoms recognised by this Charter must be provided for by law and respect the essence of those rights and freedoms. Subject to the principle of proportionality, limitations may be made only if they are necessary and genuinely meet objectives of general interest recognised by the Union or the need to protect the rights and freedoms of others.

Comparative legal research conducted for the EP Academic Freedom Monitor 2024 confirms that broadly similar limits are recognised in constitutional laws of the Member States studied (Kosta and Ceran, 2025; Ceran, forthcoming). These limits stem directly from the constitutions, protecting rights and freedoms of others, including those of other academic actors. They can also be explicitly stated in the respective provisions. For example, in Germany and Greece, certain dimensions of academic freedom do not exempt right-holders from allegiance to the constitution.¹³⁴ Limitations to academic freedom may also be inherent to the right itself, viewed in light of its foundations, professional norms, and academic values. From this perspective, restrictions can protect the conditions for academic work, for example, through measures against misconduct.

4.4.5. Possible justifications of an interference

In EU fundamental rights law, apart from the requirements of legality and respect for the essence of the right/freedom in question, limitations to fundamental rights in general and academic freedom more specifically must pursue a legitimate interest: the protection of rights and freedoms of others, or objectives of general interest. Please note, however, that in some national legal systems, restrictions can only be based on constitutionally protected rights and interests. Furthermore, such restrictions must be proportionate.

In the case of academic freedom, the 2024 EP Academic Freedom Monitor *de jure* study (Kosta and Ceran, 2025) has explained that different dimensions of academic freedom (individual and institutional) can conflict with each other. Legitimate limitations can thus arise not only from other fundamental rights protected in the Charter, but also from the right itself.

4.4.5.1. Limitations based on the different dimensions of academic freedom

In collaborations between private sector organisations and universities, the question arises whether an institutional dimension, in the form of university autonomy, can constitute a legitimate basis for restricting individual academic freedom. As noted in the 2024 EP Academic Freedom Monitor *de*

¹³¹ Stoker et al. (2023, p. 54); Commissie voor de Vrijheid van Wetenschapsbeoefening van de KNAW, 'Academische vrijheid in Nederland. Een begripsanalyse en richtsnoer' (Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen 2021) s 3.4, <https://knaw.nl/publicaties/academische-vrijheid-nederland>.

¹³² Kosta and Ceran (2025, pp 80–82); see also Ceran (forthcoming).

¹³³ The question of horizontality in EU law has generated extensive debate and falls outside the scope of this overview. For a comprehensive analysis, see Frantziou (2019).

¹³⁴ See Article 5(3) of the German Constitution and Article 16(1) of the Greek Constitution.

jure study (Kosta and Ceran, 2025), in soft law instruments on academic freedom¹³⁵ and as results from the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) judgment in *Commission v. Hungary (Lex CEU)*,¹³⁶ institutional autonomy is a pre-requisite for the exercise of the individual dimensions of academic freedom. It has been understood to serve the individual dimension of academic freedom¹³⁷ and to protect higher education institutions from threats to their autonomy coming from any source,¹³⁸ such as the government, businesses, private donors, and the church. Institutional autonomy also implies internally 'that degree of self-governance necessary for effective decision-making by institutions of higher education regarding their academic work, standards, management and related activities consistent with systems of public accountability, especially in respect of funding provided by the state, and respect for academic freedom and human rights'.¹³⁹ The question of whether institutional autonomy can restrict individual academic freedom is an issue that is under-investigated in many national jurisdictions. In relation to the German legal context, it has been noted that the university would arguably not be able to rely on *Wissenschaftsfreiheit* ('scientific freedom') as a constitutional (subjective) right to justify its interferences with the freedom to conduct scientific research and the freedom to teach of its relevant staff members.¹⁴⁰ At the same time, the university can rely on scientific freedom vis-à-vis the state, when the latter interferes with it (Gärditz, 2019, p. 60).

Individual academic freedom encompasses the freedom to choose with which other scientists one wishes to collaborate. In that context, the choice by academic staff to enter collaboration agreements with private sector organisations or actors – as a means of realising research that would otherwise be difficult, or even impossible to conduct, for example, because of the need for a given infrastructure, resources, materials, data-access, etc. – could be construed as an exercise of individual academic freedom¹⁴¹ and can feature in principle as a legitimate ground of limiting (other) dimensions of academic freedom. The question whether the invocation of such ground is genuine and whether it meets the further requirements of the proportionality test will have to be assessed with reference to the concrete context.

4.4.5.2. Limitations based on 'other' fundamental rights

A ground for limitation could – in principle – be the scientific freedom of the entity with which the university collaborates. However, here one would need to first interpret scientific freedom as a freedom that can grant rights to scientists outside the university sector (as is the case in Germany). Art. 13 CFR lists freedom of scientific research in its first sentence, separately from academic freedom, which features in the second sentence, and therefore suggesting, and certainly allowing for the possibility of, the personal scope of freedom of scientific research to be broader than that of

¹³⁵ Recommendation concerning the status of higher-education teaching personnel, adopted on 11 November 1997 by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), meeting in Paris from 21 October to 12 November 1997, at its 29th session, point 18.

¹³⁶ Case C-66/18 *Commission v. Hungary*, ECLI:EU:C:2020:792, para. 227 citing Recommendation 1762 (2006), adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on 30 June 2006 and entitled 'Academic freedom and university autonomy', which states that 'academic freedom also incorporates an institutional and organisational dimension, a link to an organisational structure being an essential prerequisite for teaching and research activities'. and the UNESCO Recommendation *ibid.* (supra footnote 136), stating that 'autonomy is the institutional form of academic freedom and a necessary precondition to guarantee the proper fulfilment of the functions entrusted to higher-education teaching personnel and institutions'.

¹³⁷ See A/HRC/56/58: The right to academic freedom – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Farida Sheed, at point 50: 'Institutional autonomy should be considered as being instrumental to academic freedom rather than the reverse'.

¹³⁸ UNESCO Recommendations, (supra footnote 136, point 19), as also cited in *Commission v. Hungary*, (supra footnote 137, para. 227).

¹³⁹ UNESCO Recommendation, (supra footnote 136, point 17).

¹⁴⁰ As discussed in K.-F. Gärditz (2019, p. 60), citing, *inter alia*, the German Administrative Court in BVerwGE 102, 304.

¹⁴¹ As discussed by Gärditz in relation to German law (2019, p. 62).

freedom of scientific research as a guarantee that is encompassed within 'academic freedom'.¹⁴² If one does construe scientific freedom as thus capable of covering scientists conducting research outside the university, one would have to – in a second step – establish that businesses and industry partners as legal persons would also be covered by the personal scope of that freedom. In that regard, one would also have to establish the conditions under which such would be the case.¹⁴³

One might also consider further possible grounds of limitations that relate to the economic rights of the business or industry entity. In the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, such economic rights include the right to property, including intellectual property (Art. 17 CFR), and the freedom to conduct a business (Art. 16). However, as noted in the literature, private companies enter such cooperations voluntarily. Therefore, these external parties must respect the fundamental/constitutional rights granted to the university (Gärditz, 2019, p. 66).

4.4.5.3. Limitations based on objectives of general interest

Several objectives of general interest have been already recognised as legitimate grounds of limitations in relation to Art. 13 CFR in the case *Commission v Hungary*. In this case, the Court considered limitations to Art. 13 CFR, Art. 14(3) CFR and Art. 16 CFR together.¹⁴⁴ It found that the national measures which placed limitations on these rights did not meet the objectives of general interest invoked. The matters concerned were maintaining public order, preventing misleading practices, and guaranteeing the quality of higher education. Other objectives of general interest recognised by Union law, and those already recognised in the Court's case-law relating to limitations on other rights, could also be addressed in future case-law, where appropriate. Furthermore, as noted in the literature, '[t]here is no express ranking of general interest objectives. Each of them has to be assessed in the light of its specific attributes and the context of the case' (Tridimas, 2023, p. 206).

4.4.5.4. Proportionality

Even if one of the above listed grounds can be accepted as in principle legitimate for limiting academic freedom as a fundamental right, such a limitation must also comply with the principle of proportionality. In EU law this means that the limiting measure must be (1) suitable/appropriate towards the objective to be achieved, it must be (2) necessary, meaning no other less restrictive but equally effective means are available and (3) that the advantages resulting from the limitation do not outweigh the disadvantages resulting for the protected right. The question of proportionality can never be assessed in the abstract, but only by taking into account all the circumstances and facts of a specific case. However, the proportionality test changes somewhat – and this may lead to different outcomes – depending on whether a fundamental right (a conflicting dimension of academic freedom or another fundamental right protected in the Charter) is invoked to justify an interference with academic freedom or an objective of general interest. The case law of the Court of Justice of the EU and the European Court of Human Rights shows that in such cases a 'fair balance' test is rightly applied¹⁴⁵, even if that test is not always applied consistently.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² That academic freedom as protected in the second sentence of Art. 13 CFR encompasses freedom to conduct scientific research has been established in *Commission v Hungary*, (supra footnote 137, para. 225).

¹⁴³ Gärditz (2019) discusses this and the applicable legal test in relation to German law, (2019), with reference to *BeVerfG* 21, 362(369); 61, 82 (101); 68, 193 (205 f.); 75, 196 (196).

¹⁴⁴ *Commission v Hungary*, (supra footnote 137, paras. 239 – 242).

¹⁴⁵ For EU law see Case C-112/00 *Schmidberger*, ECLU:EU:C:2003; for ECHR law see *Von Hannover v Germany* (No. 2), Application nos. 40660/08 and 60641/08, 7 February 2012.

¹⁴⁶ For a general discussion on 'fair balancing' in the context of EU law see V. Kosta and N. N. Shuibne, *Cultural Diversity and National Identity: Can Relevant Competing Interests be Balanced 'Fairly' in EU Internal Market Law?* In G. De Búrca et al. (eds), *Revisiting the Fundamentals of EU Law* (OUP, forthcoming).

4.4.6. Possible positive obligations resting on the state

The Court of Justice established in *Commission v. Hungary (Lex CEU)* that EU Member States are under an obligation to protect higher education institutions from threats to their autonomy coming from any source. This is enshrined in point 19 of the UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel and implies that states have a positive duty to protect and promote academic freedom.

Such positive obligations may, as we see in German law, include an obligation to provide the material conditions for an independent and scientific system, which must be examined in light of the de facto findings in the 2024 Academic Freedom Monitor report on increased pressure on higher education funding (Craciun, et al., 2024). Positive obligations may also include the obligation to protect individual academics from commercialisation pressures that lead to pressure on or infringement of academic freedom. They may also include procedural and organisational safeguards¹⁴⁷, such as rights to participate in university governance or the right to participate in selection committees. Furthermore, there could also be organisational and procedural safeguards that prevent a funder (private sector or otherwise) from exerting undue influence on research projects through, for example, undue consultation on the university's budget plans.¹⁴⁸

4.5. Foreign interference and academic freedom

4.5.1. Introduction

The analysis of foreign interference and its possible impact on academic freedom consists of three main parts. The first part examines the concept of foreign interference, outlining the types of actions it encompasses and distinguishing it from foreign influence, particularly as it relates to higher education institutions and academia. While foreign influence is generally seen as a legitimate and legal instrument of statecraft, under authoritarian regimes, it can develop into a mechanism that threatens higher education institutions and academic freedom. The second part presents a case study of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its associated actors, examining how their activities may pose, or already pose, risks to higher education institutions and academic freedom in the EU. The discussion will be followed by an overview of EU university engagement with the entities of the People's Republic of China in selected case study countries: Italy, France, Croatia, Greece, and Estonia. The final part provides an overview of the measures taken in Italy, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Sweden and Belgium to tackle foreign interference in academic freedom. The reasoning behind selecting these countries is that awareness of foreign interference in higher education varies significantly across the selected countries, both within academia and among the general public. This analysis relies on primary and secondary sources such as academic articles, official reports concerning the PRC, news sources, targeted keyword web searches, official documents and qualitative data from two specialised databases: the 'China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker' and the 'China Defence Universities Tracker'. In addition, several expert interviews were conducted in a number of selected case study countries regarding Confucius Institutes and PRC-related interference.

4.5.2. Conceptualisation of foreign interference

Foreign influence and foreign interference are often portrayed as similar and interrelated concepts in recent academic literature and policy discussions (Berzina and Soula, 2020; Fridman, 2024; Long and O'Connell, 2022). While efforts have made headway in illuminating various aspects of foreign interference, there has been limited progress towards developing a unifying definition which

¹⁴⁷ Opinion Advocate General Kokott in *Commission v. Hungary*, (supra footnote 137, points 146 – 149).

¹⁴⁸ See the situation in Germany as set out in Gärditz (2019, p. 97 et seq.).

distinctly considers the intent, transparency, legitimacy, impact, and perception of said foreign interference, as well as the means available to the foreign actor and the vulnerabilities of the target country.

The aim of this section is to provide conceptual definitions for the current analysis and discussion of foreign interference in higher education and research in the EU. Firstly, a distinction between foreign influence and foreign interference based on relevant literature is made, before further defining the key characteristics of both concepts. Secondly, a general overview of key mechanisms and possible effects of foreign influence and foreign interference in higher education is outlined.

4.5.2.1. Foreign influence and foreign interference

Foreign influence and foreign interference are closely related concepts which describe the external involvement of a foreign government in the affairs of another. It has been argued that the two concepts, when used and discussed in academic literature and official policy documents, often contain an excessively normative and politicised dimension (Berzina and Soula, 2020, pp. 1–2; Fridman, 2024, pp. 6–7; Long and O'Connell, 2022, pp. 33–35). This section aims to clarify how these concepts might be conceptually distinguished from one another.

Foreign influence commonly refers to deliberate efforts by a foreign state to pursue national goals by exerting influence over another country through means that are transparent and considered legitimate within the norms, policies, laws, and values of the target country. Crucially, the legitimacy and transparency criteria have implications for the means and the impact of influence in the target country. For example, the organisation of a cultural festival in another country, or providing a dedicated scholarship for international students. Foreign interference is characterised as covert and illegitimate efforts to exert influence, often undermining, disrupting, or violating the norms, policies, laws, and values of the target country. For example, actions that can be characterised as foreign interference are espionage, bribery, stealing data, or financing specific narratives.

An illustrative distinction can be made between soft power (Nye Jr., 1990) and sharp power (Walker, 2018) to describe foreign influence and interference, respectively (Berzina and Soula, 2020, pp. 7–8; Long and O'Connell, 2022, pp. 19–20). Soft power is described by Nye as 'getting others to want what you want' by using 'cultural attraction, ideology, and international institutions' (1990, p. 167). On the other hand, sharp power aims to 'pierce, penetrate, or perforate' the political and information environments of the target countries (Walker, 2018, p. 12). In addition to reviews of the current landscape of definitions and operationalisations, identifying foreign influence and interference with characterisations of soft and sharp power, they are also differentiated by the legitimacy of the intent, strategy, means, and impact of the exerted influence within the context of the target country's norms, policies, laws, and values.

4.5.2.2. Foreign interference targeting higher education

Long and O'Connell present a framework of forms of patterns of foreign influence targeting higher education with respect to approaches using soft and sharp power, respectively (2022, p. 20). Table 31 integrates the framework provided by Long and O'Connell with the analytical dimensions of foreign influence and foreign interference previously identified. Berzina and Soula suggest that while such criteria are useful in distinguishing foreign influence from foreign interference, they do not exclude each other's mechanisms (2020, p. 2). Additionally, Long and O'Connell stress the importance of considering the perceptions and narratives surrounding foreign interference that contribute to shaping the discourse as well as actions at the institutional and governmental levels (2022, pp. 33–35).

Table 31 – Key dimensions and patterns of foreign influence and foreign interference targeting higher education

Analytical Dimension	Foreign influence/ Soft Power (benign)	Foreign interference/ Sharp Power (malign)
Intent	Inducement, persuasion, and attraction	Deception, manipulation, and distraction
Means / Mechanisms	Student and faculty exchange programs, branch campuses, and research collaborations	Academic espionage, propaganda, censorship, and strategic philanthropy
Transparency	Fully transparent, open	Hidden, covert
Legitimacy	Normatively acceptable	Undermining/violation of norms, policies, laws, and/or values
Impact	Mutual understanding, trust, and global interdependence	Disruption and erosion of democracy and institutions

Adapted from Berzina and Soula (2020), Fridman (2024, pp. 7-10), and Long and O'Connell (2022, pp. 20-21)

4.5.3. People's Republic of China entities as a possible threat to higher education institutions and academic freedom in Europe

In this section, cases and entities are identified that either have engaged in, or have the potential to engage in, activities that threaten academic freedom and institutional autonomy within the EU Member States. The section focuses on entities affiliated with the PRC, including Confucius Institutes (CIs), the China Scholarship Council (CSC), and high-risk universities (e.g. seven universities overseen by the Chinese Ministry of Industry and Technology generally referred to as the 'Seven Sons of National Defence'). The decision to investigate entities affiliated with the People's Republic of China is based on the following points:

- Although the People's Republic of China is considered a partner, it is at the same time an economic and systemic competitor of the EU (Brinza et al. 2024, pp. 6-8).
- The PRC entities are excluded from participating in Horizon Europe Innovation Actions (European Commission, 2025, p. 6).
- Many countries have marked the PRC as a possible threat to their research, knowledge systems, and academic freedom.¹⁴⁹
- Over the past decade, there has been growing concern not only in the EU, but also in the UK, Australia and the US that various actors linked to the People's Republic of China pose a potential threat to the academic community and academic freedom.¹⁵⁰
- There are numerous news reports addressing concerns about actors with ties to the People's Republic of China and cases involving them.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ In section **Actions against Foreign Interference** are mentioned some of countries which identified the PRC as possible threat.

¹⁵⁰ For example, under Trump's first administration (2017-2021) restrictions were imposed on Chinese students and researchers in Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields who are affiliated with institutions involved in the military-civil fusion programme (Castañeda, 2021).

¹⁵¹ Below, there will be references to the cases of foreign interference, including PRC-affiliated actors.

- Several publications (scientific articles, reports, studies) acknowledge and address the involvement of various PRC-affiliated actors in academia in Europe and their (negative) impact on academic freedom.¹⁵²

4.5.3.1. Confucius Institutes

In recent years, Confucius Institutes have received considerable attention from the media, governments, and supranational institutions due to concerns about censorship, espionage, surveillance, and the dissemination of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda. The first Confucius Institute in the EU was opened in Brussels in 2005.¹⁵³ Currently, there are 496 Confucius Institutes across 160 countries (Urhová, 2024).¹⁵⁴ Of all the Confucius Institutes in the world, 22.6% are located in the EU, spread across 25 Member States.¹⁵⁵ To understand why Confucius Institutes can and do represent a form of foreign interference that threatens academic freedom, it is important to understand their structure and aim.

Structure & Aim: While the idea behind Confucius Institutes and their activities can be characterised as 'soft power', which originated in Beijing with the primary aim of promoting Chinese language and culture as well as the state narrative (Han and Tong, 2021), some actions and events associated currently with Confucius Institutes can be characterised as 'sharp power'. Confucius Institutes operate as non-governmental organisations that have been established by a partnership between three actors: a Chinese university, an overseas entity (usually a higher education institution) and the Chinese International Education Foundation (formerly Hanban), an entity affiliated with the Ministry of Education and the PRC government, which funds Confucius Institutes (Han and Tong, 2021; Long and O'Connell, 2022; Simson and Tarnowskyj, 2022). Depending on various variables such as the local context and institutional structure, the Chinese International Education Foundation not only provides the necessary funding for Confucius Institutes but also has the authority to appoint each institute's leadership and academic staff. This characterises the institutes as 'self-managing bubbles' within their host institutions (Han and Tong, 2021, p. 585).

Controversies and closures: Until 2025, Finland and Sweden were the only EU Member States to have closed all Confucius Institutes in their countries and severed ties with them (Myklebust, 2020; Vanntinen, 2022), while in Belgium, Czechia¹⁵⁶, France, Germany and the Netherlands¹⁵⁷ there were individual cases of universities severing ties and closing Confucius Institutes. The total number of terminating ties and closures in the EU is 13.¹⁵⁸ The reasons behind these decisions vary from country

¹⁵² Some of the authors who write about the possible threat or real threat by PRC-affiliated entities are Lloyd-Damjanovic (2018), d'Hooghe and Xiaoxue (2024), Haeck (2024), and Capacci and Turati (2025).

¹⁵³ [Confucius Institute in Brussels, Belgium-Office of Confucius Institutes, Confucius Institute](#)

¹⁵⁴ It must be recognized that the number of Confucius Institutes around the world is changing as many entities (e.g., countries or institutions of higher education) are closing Confucius Institutes or severing ties with the same institution. See, for example, the case of six Australian Universities (Tian, 2025).

¹⁵⁵ The number of Confucius Institutes in the EU we list is determined by comparing available data on the Confucius Institute's website and individual internet research for each country. This number should not be considered definitive. For example, our research found 9 independent institutes and 6 hosted by French universities, while the French Confucius Institute webpage lists 17 of them. It should be taken into account that, also for some countries, Confucius classrooms were taken into account.

¹⁵⁶ See: Brno daily (2022), 'Palacký University in Olomouc To End Cooperation With Confucius Institute'. December 4. <https://brnodaily.com/2022/12/04/news/palacky-university-in-olomouc-to-end-cooperation-with-confucius-institute/>

¹⁵⁷ In some cases, Confucius Institutes continued to operate independently after the hosting (partner) university cut the ties. The examples are the Confucius Institutes in Frankfurt, Trier, Düsseldorf and Hamburg.

¹⁵⁸ The number represents 10% of the total number of Confucius Institutes in the EU before their closures. The universities that cut ties are: Belgium— Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Czechia— Palacký University Olomouc, France— universities in Lyon and Nanterre, Germany— universities in Frankfurt, Hamburg, Düsseldorf and Trier, and the

to country. Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium) closed its Confucius Institute due to accusations of espionage, arguing that it was violating the principles of free research (Wittermans, 2019; Galindo, 2019). In other cases, the reasons range from political pressure to attempts by the Confucius Institute to influence academic content, undue pressure leading to (self-)censorship, and its role in spreading propaganda from Beijing.

4.5.3.2. Chinese Scholarship Council

The Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) represents another non-profit organisation affiliated with the Ministry of Education of the PRC.¹⁵⁹ It is the largest Chinese provider of scholarships for students, senior researchers, postdoctoral researchers and scientists going abroad or coming to the People's Republic of China (d'Hooghe and Xiaoxue, 2024; Chinese Scholarship Council, 2025a). In 2022, the CSC provided 19,000 scholarships to outgoing students, mostly to PhD students (d'Hooghe and Xiaoxue, 2024, p. 10).¹⁶⁰ The CSC aims to create 'a highly skilled workforce to boost the country's economic, technological and military modernisation' and promote international collaboration (d'Hooghe and Xiaoxue, 2024, p. 11; Fang et al., 2022, p. 1). PhD students funded by the CSC usually perform research in the area of PRC national interests (d'Hooghe and Xiaoxue, 2024, p. 12).¹⁶¹ There are three ways in which CSC PhD students can study abroad: through the general CSC grant programme for individuals, under a contract between the host institution and CSC, or through an agreement between the PRC and the host institution.¹⁶² The CSC webpage lists 31 higher education institutions from seven EU Member States, which represent 43,33% of all listed opportunities (China Scholarship Council, 2025b).¹⁶³

(Security) risk and controversy: The benefits for the host institution include: CSC PhD candidates are seen as valuable contributors to scientific output; CSC students can foster collaboration with China; they can also provide access to Chinese knowledge, materials, data, and research facilities; and the financial stakes are high, as appointing CSC PhD candidates is more attractive than hiring someone without a grant. The last point, however, can pose problems, as it can lead to reliance on CSC grants and students to maintain programmes. Other recognised risks of collaborating with CSC include a lack of reciprocity in transparency, threats to academic freedom and risks of self-censorship, and unwanted technology and knowledge transfer. The risks to higher education institutions and threats to academic freedom associated with CSC arise from controversial clauses in the grant agreements. This includes declarations of loyalty to the CCP, the obligation to follow guidelines from the Chinese embassy or consulate in the host country, prohibitions on harmful activities, and acknowledgement of funding (d'Hooghe and Xiaoxue, 2024, p. 12).

Netherlands— Leiden University (South China Morning Post, 2019; Czech News Agency-Czech Republic, 2022; Czech News Agency-Czech Republic, 2022; Brugier, 2025; Deutsche Welle, 2023; Leiden University, 2019)

¹⁵⁹ It should be acknowledged that there is little publicly available information about the CSC, and that the information presented here has been derived from secondary sources.

¹⁶⁰ In this section, we will consider CSC scholarships for PhD students because our primary source is '*Dutch collaboration with PhD students sponsored by the China Scholarship Council*' by Ingrid d'Hooghe and Xiaoxue Martin, published in 2024. It should be noted that the number provided by Ingrid d'Hooghe and Xiaoxue Marti was given by an anonymous source, and concerns 2022.

¹⁶¹ Areas of national interest for the PRC include natural sciences, engineering sciences, energy, aviation, health science (Fang et al., 2022)

¹⁶² For example, many Italian universities have a direct contract with the CSC, such as the Politecnico di Milano, the University of Pisa, the University of Torino, the University of Padova, the University of Bologna, the University of Naples, and the Politecnico di Torino.

¹⁶³ The countries that are listed on the CSC webpage as offering opportunities abroad are: Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain.

4.5.3.3. High-risk higher education institutions: 'Seven Sons of National Defence'

Another threat to academia in the EU comes from higher education institutions in the PRC that are affiliated with the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) and national security agencies. These high-risk institutions can be divided into two groups: the 'Seven Sons of National Defence' and a newer, emerging group – civilian universities undergoing a process of 'military-civilian fusion' (Joske, 2019; Murphy, 2024).¹⁶⁴ Based on the data in '*The China Defence Universities Tracker Exploring the military and security links of China's Universities*' by Joske (2019), there are 92 institutions characterised as very high-risk, from which 20 are civilian universities, while 23 are characterised as high-risk.¹⁶⁵ Concentrating on the 'Seven Sons of National Defence', these institutions occupy a unique position within the PRC's educational landscape, as they are neither strictly civilian nor purely military; rather, they operate in a hybrid category.¹⁶⁶ Notably, they are not overseen by the Ministry of Education, but by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), which manages a broad spectrum of responsibilities spanning both civilian and military domains (Murphy, 2024). The MIIT is responsible for key aspects of the 'Seven Sons of National Defence', such as funding, personnel appointments, high-level guidance and approval (Murphy, 2024). There are numerous risks and concerns associated with the members of this alliance. While they may not seem at first glance to pose a direct threat to academic freedom, they do, particularly because they pose a threat to the freedom of scientific research. Risks and concerns include indirect contributions to the PLA by European higher education institutions through cyberattacks on, illegal transfer of knowledge and technology from, or espionage via foreign partner universities (Joske, 2019, p. 23), while there is also the risk of a possible contribution to the violation of human rights.¹⁶⁷ It must also be recognised that most cooperation takes place in research areas that are crucial to the EU, and also vital to the People's Republic of China, while often involving dual-use.¹⁶⁸

Example: The Flemish Government banned collaboration between Flemish universities and universities belonging to the 'Seven Sons of National Defence' group, citing the potential for misuse of civilian information, interference, or espionage by PRC researchers. In addition, it was announced in 2024 that a knowledge security desk will be established to help universities and other knowledge institutions assess risks in uncertain situations and support their decision-making. To support this interaction, security guidelines for Flemish knowledge institutions will be developed (Belga News Agency, 2024).¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁴ The institutions assessed as high risk are from the Strategic Policy Institute's 'China Defence Universities Tracker'. The risk rating methodology is based on the institution's degree of proximity to PLA and security apparatuses. For more information about the methodology and rating check [About | China Defence Universities Tracker](#)

¹⁶⁵ It can be observed that the data referenced in the report were published in 2019, and it is likely that significant changes have taken place over the past six years.

¹⁶⁶ Members of 'Seven Sons of National Defence' and their specialised fields: Beihang University (aeronautics and astronautics); Beijing Institute of Technology (armaments and aeronautics); Harbin Institute of Technology (marine technology, nuclear, aeronautics, astronautics, and armaments); Harbin Engineering University (aeronautics and astronautics); Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (aeronautics and astronautics); Nanjing University of Science and Technology (armaments); and Northwestern Polytechnical University (Aeronautics, astronautics, maritime technology and armaments) (Joske, 2019).

¹⁶⁷ Example: Research by the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (UESTC) on surveillance technology has been used in human rights violations in Xinjiang (Joske, 2019, p. 12).

¹⁶⁸ Murphy (2024) raised the point that the research focus of 'Seven Sons of National Defence' members is: Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Materials Science, Computer Science (with several specialisations), Applied Physics, Mechanical Engineering, Automation and Control Systems, and Telecommunications.

¹⁶⁹ This information has been confirmed by an employee in the Research Foundation Flanders, during an interview that was conducted in October 2025.

4.5.4. European universities' involvement with entities from the PRC

This section presents case studies of specific countries and the involvement of their HEIs with various entities from the PRC. Regarding European higher education institutions' cooperation and relationships with high-risk PRC institutions, our two primary sources are the '*China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker*' and the '*China Defence Universities Tracker*'. The '*China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker*' by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies is a project launched in 2022 with the objective of mapping interaction between individual academic institutions in Europe and PRC entities. The project aims to understand the volume and nature of these interactions and to improve transparency.¹⁷⁰ The '*China Defence Universities Tracker*' by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute represent a database of PRC institutions engaged in military or security-related science and technology research. The risk rating methodology is based on the institution's degree of proximity to PLA and security apparatuses.¹⁷¹ The selected case study countries are Italy, France, Croatia, Greece, and Estonia. The selection of the case study countries has been based on available data, with the intention to cover all geographical areas of the EU, as well as spread awareness of potential foreign interference in higher education within academic circles and the broader public.

Italy: Capacci and Turati (2025) highlight in '*Country Briefing. Italy: Transparency gap and collaborations under scrutiny*' that there are more than 750 identified ties between Italian HEIs and PRC entities (41,4% linked to the PLA), 23 agreements are with 'top secret' security credential institutions, and most higher education institutions do not disclose financial benefits from agreements.¹⁷² There is also collaboration with the private sector from the PRC– Huawei has 20 active collaborations with higher education institutions (5 joint labs).¹⁷³ There are 136 collaborations in crucial areas from the PRC, but also for the EU.¹⁷⁴ There are 12 operational Confucius Institutes in Italy, and they provide substantial financial contributions to the hosting university (Capacci and Turati, 2025).¹⁷⁵ Five Italian universities have a direct agreement with CSC, also the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation is listed on the CSC webpage as a partner (China Study Abroad Network, 2016).¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁰ For more information about the '*China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracer*', visit the [China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker](#)

¹⁷¹ For more information about the '*China Defence Universities Tracker*,' and applied methodology, see: [About | China Defence Universities Tracker](#)

¹⁷² The article mentions two numbers of cooperation, that is, 758 and 826 (Capacci and Turati, 2025). Chinese institutions' security credentials refer to 'weapons and equipment research and production unit secrecy credentials', which enable HEIs to participate in different levels of classified defence- and security-related projects (Joske, 2019).

¹⁷³ Collaborations are focusing on 5G/6G technology, vehicular radar, antennas, electromagnetics, microelectronics, and high-frequency technologies. For example, the University of Pavia received €1.7 million in funding from the Huawei Research Centre in Milan (Capacci and Turati, 2025).

¹⁷⁴ Critical technology areas for the EU are: advanced semiconductor technologies, artificial intelligence technologies, quantum technologies, biotechnologies, advanced connectivity, navigation and digital technologies, advanced sensing technologies, space & propulsion technologies, energy technologies, robotics and autonomous systems, and advanced materials, manufacturing and recycling technologies. Most numerous collaborations in PRC's priority areas are in the following areas: 47 in agriculture, 26 in medicine, 10 in materials science, and 11 in biotechnologies (Capacci and Turati, 2025, p. 2).

¹⁷⁵ Only four of 12 higher education institutions published data until 2021, among them are: University of Milan (€2.4 million), University of Pisa (€1.4 million), Ca' Foscari University (€1.6 million), and University of Florence (€553 thousand). In addition to these contributions, Hanban financed the renovation of Palazzo Beleani in Rome with €1 million and €2 million to refurbish the Villa Laura in Macerata, which became a 'model Confucius Institute' (Capacci and Turati, 2025).

¹⁷⁶ University of Pisa, University of Bologna, Polytechnic University of Turin, Polytechnic University of Milan, and University of Padua. The only university that provides more detailed information about CSC offers is the University

France: Cooperation between French institutions and the PRC takes two main forms: international laboratories and bilateral agreements between two institutions (Brugier, 2025, p. 4).¹⁷⁷ In addition, there is a specific component – Franco-Chinese institutes.¹⁷⁸ There are 483 identified ties between French institutions and PRC entities, of which 93 are with institutions marked as 'very high risk', of which the majority are members of the 'Seven Sons of National Defence'. There are 15 Confucius Institutes, nine as associations and six hosted by higher education institutions (Brugier, 2025, p. 3).¹⁷⁹ In the academic year 2023/2024, there were 27 thousand students from the PRC, the majority of whom studied languages, Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, economics or business. Next to specific departments of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, 12 universities are listed as partners of CSC (China Study Abroad Network, 2016).

Croatia: In May 2025, the Prime Minister of Croatia and the PRC's Minister of Science and Technology signed a high-level *Memorandum of Cooperation in Science, Technology, and Innovation* (Pedisic, 2025, p. 2). The main areas of cooperation in joint research are material science and biotechnology (Pedisic, 2025, p. 1).¹⁸⁰ There are 90 identified ties between Croatian universities and research institutions and PRC entities, from which 47.8% are linked to the PLA. There are two Confucius Institutes in Croatia, hosted by the major universities in Zagreb and Split. The report from Pedisic (2025) concludes that the CCP *'has cultivated significant influence within the University of Zagreb's Sinology Department by fostering connections with the Confucius Institute'* (p. 5).

Greece: Since the financial crisis, cooperation between Greek and Chinese entities has increased as they generally do not require large financial investments from the host country (Tsimonis and Nestoridi, 2025, p. 1). The collaboration takes three main forms: Confucius Institutes expansion (five), creation of joint degree programmes, and joint research projects.¹⁸¹ There are 158 links between Greek and PRC entities, 34,2% of which are connected to PLA (Tsimonis and Nestoridi, 2025, p. 2).¹⁸² In Greece, there is a lack of broader awareness of the implications of cooperation with institutions from non-democratic countries, as well as of the new law that permits foreign universities to establish branches in Greece without protection of academic freedom from illiberal actors (Tsimonis and Nestoridi, 2025, p. 3).

Estonia: As in Greece and Croatia, awareness of the risks posed by cooperation with PRC entities remains limited, compounded by the limited evidence of state-level guidelines. Despite the lack of transparency, the research identified 37 ties, half of which involve cooperation with PRC institutions assessed as very high or high risk. Moreover, the country's sole Confucius Institute holds a monopoly

of Pisa. Public information regarding this collaboration indicates there are 90 CSC scholarships, mainly in fields such as physics, mathematics, computer science, energy, systems, territory, construction, information and industrial engineering, medicine, business administration, and management, along with a tuition fee waiver (Pezzini, 2024). Information about the Polytechnic University of Turin as a partner of the CSC is extracted from the university's webpage, as it is not listed on the CSC's webpage.

¹⁷⁷ International laboratories are a pluri-annual cooperation that involves important financial and human contributions from both sides. The focus of research is on Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, including artificial intelligence and quantum research.

¹⁷⁸ Franco-Chinese institutions are teaching institutions based in the PRC, focusing mainly on engineering. They accommodate Chinese students and teach them French expertise in specific areas of knowledge (Brugier, 2025, p. 5).

¹⁷⁹ Most numerous engagements with PRC entities in PRC's priority cooperation areas: 62 in the field of artificial intelligence (AI), 77 in quantum technology, 32 in semi-conductors, and 146 in material science (Brugier, 2025, p. 2).

¹⁸⁰ There are 30 agreements in material science, and 29 in biotechnology, which are on the PRC's priority cooperation areas list (Pedisic, 2025, p. 1).

¹⁸¹ The Confucius Institute in Volos suspended operations in 2023 due to flood damage (Tsimonis and Nestoridi, 2025, p. 4).

¹⁸² This is a rare case that, next to emphasising cooperation in STEM fields, the humanities and social sciences are mentioned as areas of cooperation.

on Chinese languages teaching. The only documented attack on academic freedom involving the Confucius Institute occurred in 2020, when a critical article about Huawei in a student magazine at the University of Tartu was censored (Ng, 2025).¹⁸³

Summary: Data on PRC entities and European universities show that there have been instances of foreign interference in academic freedom, particularly through Confucius Institutes, which attempted to influence the content of academic programmes or censor topics at European universities sensitive to the CCP. These efforts even led to closures in some countries. While no documented infringements of academic freedom have arisen from collaborations with high-risk universities or members of the 'Seven Sons of National Defence', such partnerships — justified by the principle of freedom of inquiry, which is not absolute — can nevertheless entail significant risks. These risks include potential violations of human rights, misuse of civilian information, (self-)censorship, and contributions to the PRC's security and military sectors through dual-use research.

Collaboration with the CSC further illustrates these concerns, as it lacks transparency and reciprocity and may create financial dependencies. The Netherlands provides a notable example, where CSC agreements have raised security risks and controversy due to the required pledge of loyalty to the CCP and PRC, directly undermining core dimensions of academic freedom — namely, the freedom to study and the freedom of academic expression.

The situation in the selected EU Member States shows that the level of involvement with entities from the PRC varies from country to country, as does the degree of dependence on these collaborations. Common elements include partnerships in strategically important fields for the PRC, which often overlap with EU priorities.¹⁸⁴ This dynamic can lead to dependence on Chinese partners, as evidenced by the financial contributions made by the Confucius Institute to Italy, or Estonia's dependence on Chinese language teachers.

Another important point is that awareness of foreign interference in higher education varies considerably from country to country, both within academia and among the general public. This variation forms the basis for the next section, which examines the measures the EU and selected Member States are taking to protect higher education from foreign interference.

4.5.5. Actions against foreign interference

This section presents the responses and measures taken to directly or indirectly protect academic freedom from foreign interference. First, two EU documents are briefly presented, followed by an overview of responses and measures by several EU Member States: Italy, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Sweden, and Belgium.¹⁸⁵

The EU's measures against foreign interference can be seen in the European Commission's Guidelines '*Tackling R&I Foreign Interference*'¹⁸⁶ from 2022, and the Council's '*Recommendation on*

¹⁸³ At that time, the University of Tartu and Huawei had a partnership on student scholarships and internships.

¹⁸⁴ Some of the crucial fields for the PRC are: artificial intelligence, biotechnologies, quantum information sciences, semiconductors and microelectronics, aerospace and space technologies, advanced material engineering, and energy technologies.

¹⁸⁵ Country case-studies have been selected based on available data in '*European Research Security: Threat Perspectives and the Responses of Policy Makers and Research Performing Organisations*' that was published in June 2025, and their maturity in public policy addressing foreign interference. Additionally, the Belgium case is represented by the Research Funding Organisation mechanisms of protection from foreign interference, as it was only institutions that replied to our invitation for an interview, also providing an overview of how other levels deal with the rising question.

¹⁸⁶ R&I means Research and Innovation.

Enhancing Research Security' from 2024. Although the two documents are not directly concerned with academic freedom, the freedom to research represents one of the three core dimensions of it.

The '*Tackling R&I Foreign Interference*' (2022) outlines a non-exhaustive toolkit of possible mitigation measures for HEIs and Research Performing Organisations (RPOs) to develop a comprehensive strategy for tackling foreign interference. These recommendations cover four key areas: values, governance, partnerships, and cybersecurity.¹⁸⁷

The '*Recommendation on Enhancing Research Security*' (2024) addresses the need to research security within the EU R&I sector under a challenging geopolitical context and growing international tensions. Main points from the recommendations are:

Context and Risks: The Recommendation acknowledges that openness, academic freedom, and international cooperation are central to world-class research. However, the R&I sector is particularly vulnerable due to its worldwide collaboration and inherent openness. Growing strategic competition means EU researchers are increasingly targeted to obtain state-of-the-art knowledge and technology, often through deceptive or coercive methods, or by exploiting seemingly bona fide academic cooperation.

Guiding Principles: Policy actions must respect subsidiarity, proportionality, and institutional autonomy. The approach must promote cooperation that is 'as open as possible, as closed as necessary'. Crucially, the objective is to manage risk rather than to avoid it, ensuring safeguards are proportionate and avoid unnecessary administrative burden. Policies should be country-agnostic and risk-based, identifying and addressing risks regardless of their origin, while making every effort to avoid discrimination or stigmatisation. A 'whole-of-government approach' is required to ensure coherence across policy areas like higher education, security, and foreign affairs.¹⁸⁸

Italy finds itself in a realisation phase.¹⁸⁹ This means that while there is a growing recognition of the associated risks, formal policies and practices are still under development and implementation is at an early phase. Until now, only a small number of higher education institutions have established internal procedures and frameworks (James et al., 2025). In August 2025, the '*National Framework for Research Security and Integrity*' was published by the Ministry of University and Research, although there is resistance from academic circles stemming from the legal principle of institutional autonomy in international cooperation (Network on China, ETNC, 2024), partly driven by constraints in domestic funding (James et al. 2025).¹⁹⁰ The aim of the '*National Framework for Research Security and Integrity*' is to safeguard the integrity and security of the national research system while

¹⁸⁷ Recommendations in each key area:

Values and Academic freedom: vulnerability assessments, reporting channels, and targeted risk mapping.

Governance: codes of conduct, dedicated foreign interference committees, and tailored training.

Partnership: due diligence checks, clear reporting criteria and secure agreement negotiations.

Cybersecurity: cyber-hygiene education, two-factor authentication, screening protocols and incident-response plans.

¹⁸⁸ Recommended actions for actors: **MS**– co-design national security strategies with R&I stakeholders, offer advisory and training services, and liaise with intelligence agencies; **RPOs**– embed systematic risk management, conduct partner due diligence, define exit plans and compartmentalise sensitive labs/data; **Research Funding Organisations**– make research security a core criterion in grant applications; **EC**– build a one-stop platform for tools and data and deliver biennial progress reports to the Council.

¹⁸⁹ James et al. (2025) have defined a three-stage model of maturity that depends on the maturity of policies and practices. Three stages are: realisation, definitions and capacity building, and Implementation. James et al.'s work focuses on research security. In contrast, we seek to apply their three-stage model to identify the stage of national development in relation to foreign interference as a broader concept.

¹⁹⁰ Italy allocates €1.5 billion to public research institutions in the 2025 budget (Turone, 2025). Another fact that goes with this statement is that Italy spent only 0.4% of its GDP on higher education in 2023 (Government expenditure on education, 2025).

simultaneously promoting open, safe, and responsible international cooperation, thereby implementing the '*Recommendation on Enhancing Research Security*'.

Czechia is currently in the early part of the implementation, which involves all actors. It is interesting to highlight that policies explicitly address foreign interference in the social sciences and humanities as well as STEM fields (James et al. 2025, p. 74). Policy responses are guided by three influential 2024 'Methodologies' documents, which provide rationales, due diligence guidance, and advice on institutional risk management.¹⁹¹ In recognition of capacity issues, the government has allocated funding, partly sourced from the *EU Cohesion Fund*, to universities for developing awareness-raising and training activities for staff. Furthermore, starting in 2025, the *Higher Education Act* will require universities to report their progress on the implementation of research security measures in their annual reports. The Czech approach stresses the comprehensive protection of the research ecosystem, including both national and economic interests (James et al. 2025). In 2023, the '*Czech National Security Strategy*' identified the PRC and Russia as a threat (James et al. 2025, p. 76)

France possesses one of the most mature research security systems, employing a top-down, centralised model based on statutory requirements. The legal foundation for safeguarding sensitive scientific and technical potential is the *Protection du Potentiel Scientifique et Technique de la Nation* (PPST) framework, which requires implementing protective security measures for laboratories engaged in certain defined research areas (James et al. 2025). These requirements include the designation of restricted access areas (*Zones à Régime Restrictif* or ZRR), for which all personnel, including French citizens and foreign nationals, must undergo vetting procedures (James et al. 2025, p. 90). The centralised system involves the General Secretariat for National Defence and Security (SGDSN) and its network of Security and Defence Officers (FSDs), who screen all international collaboration projects for sensitive knowledge (James et al. 2025, pp. 90-92). Recent reforms also introduced criminal penalties, such as fines and imprisonment, for non-compliance with the PPST, emphasising stringent enforcement. French actors put particular attention on the PRC as a threat (James et al. 2025, p. 87).

Germany's response is characterised by a decentralised, bottom-up approach, reflecting its federal system and constitutional protection of academic freedom (*Wissenschaftsfreiheit*), and the principle of institutional autonomy (James et al. 2025, p. 96). The system relies heavily on self-regulation and guidance developed by sector actors, such as the German Research Foundation and the German Rectors Conference (HRK). There has long been a focus on the 'dual-use dilemma' and ethics, leading institutions to establish research ethics committees to advise researchers on how to assess 'safety-relevant research' (James et al. 2025, p. 99). Organisations such as the DLR Project Management Agency, the DAAD, and HRK have created tools, such as the online DLR OPERATE tool, to assist researchers and institutions in performing due diligence and managing risk in collaborations (James et al. 2025, p. 97).¹⁹² While Germany is currently undergoing a broad stakeholder dialogue, the goal remains to protect knowledge and technology under the principle '*as open as possible, as secure as necessary*' (James et al. 2025, p. 98). Overall, Germany manages foreign interference risks

¹⁹¹ The 'Methodologies' document was developed by the Interdepartmental Working Group for Combating Illegitimate Interference in the Higher Education and Research Environment. Three reports are: *Strengthening Resilience Against Illegitimate Interference in the Higher Education and Research Environment*; *Methodological Recommendation for Risk Management In Research Security at the Institutional Level*; and *Methodological Recommendation Defining the Minimum Scope of Due Diligence and Risk Management in Cooperation with Third Parties within the Context of Strengthening the Resilience of the Higher Education and Research Environment against Illegitimate Interference* (James et al. 2025, p. 160).

¹⁹² The German Rectors Conference (HRK) has published guidelines on international university co-operation that explicitly focus on adherence to ethical standards and the freedom of research and teaching (James et al. 2025, p.97); DAAD has set up the Centre for International Academic Cooperation (KIWi), a competence centre, which provides targeted advice, support, and guidance on international science collaboration and knowledge security issues (James et al. 2025, p. 39; see: <https://www.daad.de/en/information-services-for-higher-education-institutions/kiwi/>).

primarily through widespread awareness and promotion of a culture of informed decision-making by individual researchers and autonomous institutions (James et al. 2025).¹⁹³ The federal government has identified the PRC as a possible threat to German research (James et al. 2025, p. 97).

Sweden is currently in a stage of definition and capacity-building (James et al. 2025). The term '*responsible internationalisation*' is used to provide a broader framework that encompasses research security concerns alongside ethics, integrity, and academic freedom. A key legislative measure is the '*Protective Security Act*' (2021), which imposes mandatory protective security requirements, including physical, information, and personnel security, on universities engaged in security-sensitive operations (James et al. 2025, p. 139). Secondly, the '*Foreign Direct Investment Screening Act*' (2023) allows the screening of foreign investments in security-sensitive areas, as well as to review existing foreign research funding (James et al. 2025). The government is currently evaluating recommendations for national guidelines and the establishment of a national support to enhance capacity building and foster dialogue across the research ecosystem.¹⁹⁴ Sweden's approach is based on a sector-led approach, shaped by the constitutional protection of university autonomy and academic freedom. However, the Security Service warned that the PRC government uses Chinese citizens at Swedish higher education institutions to gather technology and knowledge to strengthen the PLA (James et al. 2025, p. 130).¹⁹⁵

In **Belgium**, in addition to the Flemish government's decision to ban cooperation with the 'Seven Sons of National Defence', it is interesting to see how other actors, such as research funding organisations (RFOs), deal with the issue of foreign interference and academic freedom. As an example, the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) represents an RFO that is dedicated to research security and the protection of academic freedom. Their approach is inspired by existing practices in other countries, including Germany, Australia, Czechia, the Netherlands, and Canada, and follows both mentioned documents from the EU and translates them to local reality (FWO, n.d.). One of the core elements in the FWO operation is raising awareness about the risks in international collaboration. The FWO has developed its own mechanism for determining the level of country risk by combining different indices such as academic freedom, country corruption, rule of law, and democracy index.¹⁹⁶

Summary: The first difference lies in the maturity of these national policies. The selected countries show varying speed in addressing and implementing measures against foreign interference in higher education. Sweden and France have been working for years to protect academic freedom from such interference. While others, such as Italy and Czechia, are in the initial phase, they are nonetheless beginning to adopt measures and guidelines. Although there are differences in maturity and divergence in policy approaches to managing foreign interference, it can be said with certainty that awareness is being raised across all selected EU Member States, accompanied by a shift towards capacity building.

At this stage, it is challenging to determine which approach is more effective, as each is tailored to national realities, faces its own unique challenges, or has yet to be fully implemented. As argued by Balme (2025), there is a clear need for the evaluation of these and other existing public policies that address these issues.

¹⁹³ For example, many universities in Germany have 'civil clauses' that restrict them from conducting military or dual-use research (James et al. 2025, p. 13). See also Maassen et al. (2025, p. 77)

¹⁹⁴ The Swedish Government provides financial support, often using EU Cohesion Funds, to support pilot projects to develop internal university capacity, awareness raising, and training activities (James et al. 2025).

¹⁹⁵ Next to the PRC, Russia and Iran are identified as countries of threat.

¹⁹⁶ The information has been gathered during an interview with an employee at the Research Foundation Flanders.

This chapter reveals that several common institutional challenges remain, including capacity building, financial constraints, and, more generally, inconsistent implementation of recommendations and policies in practice. Positive trends, however, include the development of robust guidelines and frameworks, as well as a strong commitment to risk mitigation and transparency.

Regarding the level of involvement of EU institutions in this issue, three key initiatives were highlighted at the *European Flagship Conference on Research Security* in October 2025. These include: the establishment of a new European Centre of Expertise for Research Security within the European Commission; the creation of a due diligence platform for researchers to support risk assessment in international cooperation; and the development of a new common methodology for EU Member States to test the resilience of their research organisations (Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2025).

5. Conclusions

The European Parliament's decision to establish a Monitor on Academic Freedom was prompted by concerns that academic freedom in the EU had come under increasing pressure. The annual studies conducted for the EP Academic Freedom Monitor since 2022 provide relevant insights into the key trends regarding the state of de jure and de facto academic freedom in the EU Member States. These studies revealed that threats emerged simultaneously from various sources, the most significant of which were political interference, restrictions imposed by institutional leadership and management, internal academic tensions and conflicts, attacks on academia from society, and risks associated with growing collaborations with the private sector. Moreover, there have been widespread concerns, particularly since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, about the pressure on academic freedom from European and national security policies, combined with the threats posed by growing foreign interference in European academia.

The findings of this year's study indicate that academic freedom across the EU continues to be under pressure. For example, the updated synthesis shows that the AFI 2025 update has identified eight EU Member States that have experienced a statistically significant decline in their AFI score over the past decade: Austria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Portugal (Kinzelbach et al., 2025, pp. 10–11). Moreover, the country scores for the individual AFI sub-indicators suggest that the two aspects of academic freedom that are most under pressure in the EU Member States are the freedom to teach and conduct research, and institutional autonomy. At the same time, compared to other regions and countries in the world, respect for academic freedom in the EU remains relatively positive and stable, despite an overall negative trend with gradual changes in many EU Member States from year to year.

This situation raises various important themes. First, it is imperative to ensure that academic freedom in the EU does not deteriorate further. Second, the declining respect for academic freedom in many countries worldwide, including the US (Kinzelbach et al., 2025), offers the EU the opportunity, if not the responsibility, to leverage its relatively positive situation regarding academic freedom to form a global alliance with other countries that (still) have relatively high respect for academic freedom, such as Australia, Botswana, Canada, Chile, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa, South Korea, and Uruguay. The goal of such an alliance would be to jointly promote academic freedom as a core value in global scientific cooperation and to jointly develop policy options for strengthening the protection of academic freedom.

This year's study shows that political interference continues to pose a significant threat to academic freedom in the EU. In most EU countries, political interference occurs indirectly through a deterioration of the conditions for academic freedom, for example, by undermining institutional autonomy, through budget cuts or changes in the working conditions of academics, or by restricting the possibilities for academic self-governance. However, there are also more direct tendencies towards political interference aimed at strengthening political control over academia, for example, through political appointments of university leaders and members of university boards, and growing political control over previously independent bodies that evaluate the quality of teaching and research at universities. In addition to political interference, the country studies reveal growing concern about the impact on academic freedom of harassment of academic staff and students. This harassment can come from society, especially through social media, but can also be caused internally by academic colleagues or students. While not all forms of harassment have the same impact, in the most severe cases of harassment can lead to self-censorship, for example, in the form of avoiding sensitive research problems and teaching topics, or even victims leaving academia altogether.

Moreover, the study identifies several trends that pose specific challenges to academic freedom in the EU. First, political polarisation, or the divide between political groups, has become more extreme in several EU Member States and has become one of the greatest threats to liberal democracies. In

this respect, political polarisation also threatens academic freedom, for example, by interpreting the role of the science system in society from an extremist political point of view and blaming academia for some of the problems, such as inequality or vaccination policy, highlighted by certain political parties or movements. This is known to have led to attacks on social media, for example, against academics who address sensitive topics in their research. The four country reports show that political polarisation has also entered academia, with the danger of creating divides within academia that might lead to attempts to silence dissenting voices, and result in undue self-censorship. A specific issue in this concerns what might be called 'post-illiberal government' challenges. As the Polish case demonstrates, replacing a government with illiberal tendencies with a liberal democratic government can create a situation in which the liberal government encounters various institutional pitfalls that are difficult to circumvent in the short term without resorting to the same methods that created them in the first place. Inaction leaves the damage irreparable and demobilises the base, while effective action may mean surrendering to the illiberal strategy¹⁹⁷.

The declining respect for academic freedom in the US is also linked, *inter alia*, to the increasing political polarisation in the country. This trend has potential consequences not only for the American science system, but also for academia in the EU Member States. It includes, for example, the intention to reduce or halt public funding for research in areas that do not fit the current US administration's political agenda, such as climate change, virology and vaccinology, gender studies, critical theory, and renewable energy. However, the US administration seeks to control not only the research agendas of US institutions and academics, but also those of researchers elsewhere, as the Belgian and Finnish cases in this report demonstrate. For the EU, this means that everything possible must be done to prevent the negative consequences of developments in the US for academic freedom in the US. For example, the EU initiatives regarding European data sovereignty are timely, relevant and necessary in this context. It also offers the EU the opportunity to strengthen Europe's position as one of the world's leading science regions, as demonstrated by initiatives such as 'Choose Europe for Science'.¹⁹⁸ Moreover, the US administration's decision to stop using soft power, for example, through USAID, to promote democratic principles and build democratic institutions in low- and middle-income countries worldwide, creates opportunities for the EU to use its soft power capabilities (for example through science diplomacy) to promote the role of academic freedom in its scientific cooperation, for example with the AU and African countries.

Another trend putting pressure on academic freedom in the EU is the potential influence of the private sector on academic freedom in relation to the commercialisation of academia. The study specifically examines from a legal perspective the aspects of academic freedom that may be affected; the respective rights holders and duty bearers; the permissible limits to academic freedom and possible justifications for interference; and the potential obligations of the government. The analysis shows that collaboration with the private sector can be beneficial for academia, but that in some cases it can also lead to threats or infringements on individual or institutional academic freedom. For example, excessive financial or other dependence on such collaborations could lead to research problems, education agendas, or institutional priorities being steered in the direction of private commercial interests. This dynamic illustrates that restrictions on academic freedom in such contexts are often subtle rather than direct, but their cumulative effect can lead to systemic threats or interferences. The possibility of such interference underscores the need for effective preconditions for collaboration and partnerships between the private sector and academia, including organisational and procedural safeguards.

A fourth trend analysed in this year's study is foreign interference. This analysis is primarily based on empirical data on several institutions in the People's Republic of China and their involvement in these actions: the Confucius Institutes, the Chinese Scholarship Council, and high-risk universities

¹⁹⁷ See: Bill and Stanley, 2025.

¹⁹⁸ See: <https://marie-sklodowska-curie-actions.ec.europa.eu/actions/choose-europe-for-science>

with close ties to the People's Liberation Army and the security services. In addition, the report provides an overview of international cooperation between higher education institutions in a number of EU Member States, including Croatia, France, Greece, Estonia and Italy, and entities from the People's Republic of China. The analysis concludes with actions taken from certain EU Member States, including Italy, France, Czechia, Germany, Belgium and Sweden, to protect academic freedom from foreign interference. Key findings include Chinese agencies' attempts to undermine academic freedom in the EU, growing concerns about collaborations with high-risk universities, potential reliance on the Chinese Scholarship Council for PhD candidates, and, crucially, divergent policy approaches across EU Member States to manage these threats.

This year's study demonstrates that while the state of academic freedom in the EU Member States has been slowly eroding for a while now, threats to the state of academic freedom have further intensified over the last 12-18 months. This concerns internal EU developments, such as growing political interference, more cases of harassment of academics and students, the potential influence of the private sector on academic freedom, and growing impacts of political polarisation on academia. But we also see growing threats related to geopolitical developments and conflicts. This concerns especially the impact of the declining respect for academic freedom in the US and growing pressure on academic freedom through foreign interference, e.g. from China.

This situation calls for appropriate measures, firstly to counter the erosion of academic freedom in the EU, and secondly to respond adequately to the threats to academic freedom in the EU arising from geopolitical developments. This is addressed in the policy options based on this year's study. The aim of these policy options is to prevent further erosion of academic freedom in Europe, strengthen its legal protection, and raise awareness of the importance of academic freedom within the academic community and society as a whole.

6. Key findings and policy options

6.1. Key findings

The analysis of the main recent trends regarding de facto academic freedom in the EU Member States has yielded the following key findings:

1. Although the state of de facto academic freedom in the European Union is generally better than in other world regions, academic freedom is under pressure in almost all EU Member States. The two aspects of academic freedom estimated to be under most pressure in EU Member States are the freedom to teach and conduct research, and institutional autonomy.
2. For eight EU Member States: Austria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, and Portugal; it has been estimated that the state of academic freedom has declined significantly over the past decade (2014-2024).
3. Direct and indirect political interference continues to pose a significant threat to academic freedom in the EU. Moreover, in several EU Member States, governments have deprioritised higher education and academic research in their policies and budgets. This has contributed to the increasing pressure on academic freedom.
4. There are concerns about increasing internal tension and conflict within academia in several EU Member States, related to, among other things, political polarisation and geopolitical conflicts. This tension and conflict, which often leads to attempts to silence dissenting voices, opinions and ideas, can negatively impact academic freedom.
5. Political polarisation in EU Member States is potentially undermining trust in academia among a considerable part of the population and is increasing pressure on academic freedom, amongst other things, as a consequence of growing attacks on academics and academic institutions via social media.
6. Respect for academic freedom is under severe political pressure in the US. This poses threats and opportunities, as well as responsibilities, for the EU.
7. The growing reliance of the academic sector on non-public funding could increase pressure on academic freedom, against the backdrop of public budget cuts in many EU Member States. There is a general lack of transparent and clear European guidelines for developing sound partnerships with private and non-traditional public actors that respect academic freedom.
8. Intensifying geopolitical tensions fuel foreign interference and the undesirable transfer and use of European knowledge and technologies. The resulting challenges within the European academic community, for example, with regard to the assessment and management of research security risks and the development of responsible international collaborations and partnerships, could have a negative impact on academic freedom. It also highlights the need for Europe to address the strategic importance of data sovereignty.
9. The increased political awareness of the erosion of academic freedom in the EU Member States has so far not been sufficiently followed by the introduction of appropriate new regulations and guidelines, and effective platforms and support structures regarding academic freedom at European, national and institutional levels.

6.2. Policy options

The proposed policy options take into account the findings of the present study, which has highlighted several issues with respect to the state of academic freedom in the EU that deserve attention and possible action. These findings highlight the ongoing erosion of the state of academic freedom in Europe, as illustrated by the statistically significant deterioration over the past ten years of the general AFI index score of eight EU Member States (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). At the same time, while the EU seeks to address this erosion by strengthening the protection and promotion of academic freedom, for example through the proposed European Research Area (ERA) act,¹⁹⁹ the study shows the multifaceted nature of current trends in academic freedom across EU Member States and the growing diversity among EU Member States regarding the state of play on de jure and de facto academic freedom. Nonetheless, addressing the issues that threaten academic freedom is highly relevant for the EU as a geopolitical Union, for the EU's global competitiveness and science collaboration, and for the preferred European way of life.²⁰⁰ Tackling all issues raised in the study at EU level is not feasible. Protecting academic freedom is the responsibility not only of the EU, but also of national public authorities, institutional leadership and the academic community at large.

With this in mind, we have developed policy options that are potentially relevant from the perspective of possible EU-level legislation and non-legislative initiatives that could contribute to the promotion and protection of academic freedom in the EU. An important starting point is that while the EU's formal competence in the field of education is limited to a supporting role that excludes the harmonisation of national legislation, it can contribute to the protection of academic freedom through various channels. The EU offers support measures in education and participates in intergovernmental processes, such as the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Furthermore, EU internal market rules can influence education policy, particularly regarding private education, which is considered a 'service', as demonstrated by several court cases. The EU also holds shared competence in research and can adopt measures for the European Research Area (ERA). However, EU measures must comply with the principles of proportionality and subsidiarity, and with Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which protects academic freedom (Kosta and Ceran, 2025).

The 2024 European Parliament Academic Freedom Monitor²⁰¹ study proposed a set of seven policy options:

1. Exploring further the scope and nature of academic freedom as an EU fundamental right;
2. Strengthening existing European legal frameworks for promoting and protecting academic freedom;
3. Enhancing awareness of definitions and interpretations of academic freedom;
4. Developing the European Parliament Academic Freedom Monitor;
5. Better integration of academic freedom into EU higher education, research, development and innovation;
6. Conducting meta-analysis of academic freedom data;
7. Enhancing the knowledge base and deepening understanding.

¹⁹⁹ See: <https://european-research-area.ec.europa.eu/era-act>

²⁰⁰ See: speech by President von der Leyen at the 'Choose Europe for Science' event at La Sorbonne, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/speech_25_1130

²⁰¹ See: Maassen et al., 2025; see also the STOA Options Brief, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/765776/EPRS_BRI\(2025\)765776_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/765776/EPRS_BRI(2025)765776_EN.pdf)

Based on the findings of the 2025 study, it can be argued that each of these policy options is still potentially relevant and therefore deserves careful consideration by the European Parliament. However, the findings of the 2025 study show a number of emerging trends regarding academic freedom that require new approaches and measures.

Therefore, in addition to the policy options above that were proposed in the 2024 study, this year a number of new policy options are identified.

We propose the following set:

Policy option 1: Developing and implementing transparent and clear strategies and guidelines for responding to foreign interference and handling research security risks in international scientific collaborations.

The legislative and regulatory environment for academia has changed in response to increased foreign interference in academia and research risks related to undesirable transfer of knowledge and technologies. However, these changes at national level differ significantly and have in turn led to divergent institutional approaches and practices across EU Member States. In this context, it is essential that the EU highlights the key priorities for managing and limiting foreign interference in European, national and institutional contexts within the EU, and that it promotes and supports good practice. For this purpose, a specialised expert body at European level could be established. For it to be effective, this expert body could be expected to interact and work closely with national expert bodies, such as the Dutch Contact Point for Knowledge Security²⁰² and the German DAAD Centre for International Academic Cooperation (KIWi).²⁰³ Complementary to this set up, a specialised knowledge security unit for staff and students could be established within each academic institution. This would create a single point-of-contact arrangement encompassing the European, national and institutional level. This would address the problem that academic staff, students, and their institutions generally lack the knowledge and insights needed to make informed decisions regarding foreign interference and research security risks, and therefore require external guidance from their national authorities and the European Union.

Policy option 2: Developing a European strategy for promoting Europe as a core region for protecting and promoting academic freedom

The declining respect for academic freedom in the US leaves Europe as the world's main remaining science region that actively promotes and protects academic freedom. A new European strategy for addressing this situation is required, which would both allow for the protection of academic freedom in EU Member States against undue interference from the US and other countries, and demonstrate that Europe is actively promoting and protecting academic freedom in international science collaboration. Part of this strategy could be the forming of a new strategic global alliance between the EU and countries that actively support and protect academic freedom in their science system.

Policy option 3: Developing and implementing adequate measures to counter the impact of political polarisation on academic freedom

Political polarisation creates specific challenges for the public authorities of EU Member States when it comes to the promotion and protection of basic European values in society in general and academia in particular. Academic freedom is pressured through direct or indirect political interference in many EU Member States, and these pressures have intensified in relation to political polarisation in those countries where illiberal democratic governments have deprioritised higher education and academic research in their governmental programmes. Therefore, strengthening the

²⁰² See: <https://english.loketkennisveiligheid.nl/>

²⁰³ See: <https://www.daad.de/en/information-services-for-higher-education-institutions/kiwi/>

support for national government agencies, institutional leadership and management, and academic staff and student associations could be considered in addressing potential negative impacts of political polarisation on academic freedom. This concerns both the 'post-illiberalism' context and the need to strengthen the institutional foundations of academic freedom under 'liberal democracy' regimes.

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8. ANNEX 1: Methodology updated synthesis and four country case studies

Methodological approach

Section 3.4 presents the study of current trends concerning academic freedom in four EU Member States, Belgium, Finland, Italy, and Poland. The study was conducted as desk research, combined with various forms of expert inputs, stakeholder interviews, and interactions with academic stakeholders using the following methodological approach.

The country studies were conducted to identify instances of threats to or violations of academic freedom, and to examine how a particular country has attempted to address these issues. The study focused on trends in academic freedom in four selected EU Member States in the period 2023–25. This included focusing the desk research primarily on various international and national media outlets, specialist higher education newspapers (national and institutional), and, where available, recent non-peer reviewed reports on academic freedom. Given the time period available, there were hardly any academic, peer-reviewed publications available on recent trends in academic freedom in the four selected EU Member States or the EU as a whole. This is a reality and a challenge for this study. Compiling an overview of recent trends in de facto academic freedom requires interpreting sources that have not been peer-reviewed. It is important to note in this regard that the report's interpretation and coverage of academic freedom trends may be unbalanced. The study attempted to address this through interviews with national stakeholders and experts. For each of the four case countries 2–4 interviews were undertaken.

Selected countries in this review

Four countries were selected for analysis in this study. Several principles have been applied for case selection strategy²⁰⁴, including:

- The selected countries should cover a range of positions in the Academic Freedom Index 2025 update (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). Belgium, ranked 5th among 179 countries, is one of the EU Member States consistently ranked among the countries where the respect for academic freedom is highest. Finland is among EU Member States that show a statistically significant deterioration in their AFI general scores over the last decade, ranked 45th in 2025, down from 13th in 2024. Poland is also marked red in the AFI 2025 update, indicating that the country's overall AFI score has declined over the past decade. However, unlike Finland, Poland has risen in the AFI rankings and now ranks 33rd in 2025, an improvement from rank 78 (2024) and 87 (2023). Finally, in the AFI 2025 update, Italy ranks 24th out of 179 countries worldwide, down from 5th place (2024) and 4th place (2023), although the decline over the past 10 years is not statistically significant.
- The four selected countries represent a reasonable geographical balance in that they are located in different geographical regions in the EU and belong to both the larger and smaller Member States of the EU.

Search strategy

In order to most validly identify and investigate cases relevant to each selected country, an initial strategy using web-based searches in two stages was developed taking a starting-point in country reports included in previous EP Academic Freedom studies. The first stage aimed to identify the most relevant cases of threats to, and if applicable, violations of academic freedom within a country. During this stage, a broad search using generic search terms relevant to academic freedom was

²⁰⁴ See also footnote 8.

conducted aimed at identifying academic freedom cases. During this stage, the web search was conducted in both English and the relevant local language(s) using identical search terms in each respective language. In countries with multiple official languages or with significant minority language users, additional searches were conducted. Where necessary, approximate translations were made based on input from country experts, translation tools, and contextual clues from relevant sources. For both searches, the web search tools are set to the relevant region for both the English and local language searches. All searches are done within the timeframe between the time of data collection and three years prior. Once the initial search was completed, a second stage of additional searches was undertaken using specific search terms drawn from the specific cases identified in the first stage. These searches were conducted using the same parameters as during the first stage.

Source selection

The sources used in the desk research fall into six main categories. These categories together create an analytical framework for identifying and interpreting the most important sources of trends in academic freedom. This framework is as comprehensive and coherent as possible and provides a picture of current issues surrounding academic freedom within each selected country.

1. Global/international and national news and media outlets. This category is comprised of 'traditional' news and media outlets at all relevant levels.
2. Media outlets focused on higher education and science news and issues. This category is comprised of organisations and agencies focused on news, issues, and discussions relevant to international and national higher education and science. Some notable examples include University World News, Times Higher Education, and Science|Business.
3. National organisations and governmental bodies. This includes higher education organisations and agencies within a given country that either represent an important stakeholder group in the higher education sector or serve an important role in governing the sector. Some examples include national parliaments or other governmental bodies where political discussions take place; associations/unions representing important groups within the sector, such as students and academic staff, or private sector enterprises.
4. International and supranational higher education organisations and agencies. This is comparable to the previous category, and includes global/international organisations, agencies, associations, and representative bodies. While not applicable to every country report, some issues find expression beyond the national level in ways that are relevant to ongoing discussions at the national level as well as the country report in question.
5. Higher education institutions. In this category we included national and institutional higher education news outlets.
6. Miscellaneous documents and less well-known outlets of relevance to ongoing issues. This category covers documents and websites that are of high relevance to a specific academic freedom issue without fitting into the above categories. Some examples include petitions, open letters, and blog posts from key actors and stakeholders. Given that there is a general reduction in reliability using these types of sources, their use is subject to stricter requirements and scrutiny with regards to relevance, reliability, and verifiability.

The list is not exhaustive, and the salience of each category will vary between each country depending on a number of factors. Some of these include press freedom, cooperation between national government and higher education stakeholders in key questions regarding academic freedom, the perceived importance of academic freedom as an issue by central stakeholders, and the degree of specialisation of journalists and news outlets on issues of higher education. This may lead to differences between country reports in the balance between the dimensions of academic freedom that are identified, expressed, and addressed in any of the sources. For example, a closer look at EU Member States reveals differences in how each respective country's higher education

sector is organised and governed, the role of central stakeholders in political discussions and higher education policy-making, and attitudes among central stakeholders with respect to the role of higher education institutions in society. Furthermore, news and media outlets will necessarily devote a varying degree of attention and resources to higher education issues both within and amongst countries included in the report.

Search tools

For the part of the desk research comprised of analysing news and media reports on topics related to academic freedom within each country, two news article databases were considered: Factiva by DOW Jones and NexisUni. While both are reputable databases and search engines used in academic and journalistic research, both were ultimately dropped in favour of a general web search tool for two main reasons. This implied that additional searches were made within the respective webpages of key stakeholders and key actors within the higher education sector.

First, the tested databases had a significant gap with respect to indexed articles from the date of the search going back several weeks. For several of the reports, the missing timeframe would have led to a lack of coverage of recent developments and ongoing situation with respect to academic freedom. Second, the tested databases were found to be lacking in the title list and were not considered to provide an exhaustive list of reputable news sources covering ongoing discussions and developments of academic freedom. This is exacerbated by the nature of higher education, and academic freedom in particular, as a specialist field within journalism, favouring a broader approach in the initial background investigation.

Search terms

All reports include search terms containing the name of the country in question, as well as key terms such as 'academic freedom', 'higher education', or 'institutional autonomy'. In some cases, the search terms have been more specific. Since English is not the first language in any of the four selected countries, the search terms were translated into the respective language, making the search much broader. The search focused on information from the period 2023–2025, although in some cases articles from 2021–2022 were also included. The study identified the sources that can be considered most reliable. The desk research attempted to exclude sources that are not considered politically objective.

Synthesis and validation

After the completion of the country reports for four selected countries, the research team produced a synthesis of key findings and cross-cutting issues, used, amongst other things, for identifying and developing fitting policy options. The findings were further discussed with a Sounding Board.

The Sounding Board for the EP Academic Freedom Monitor studies was established in 2023, and its member organisations have since provided input into all EP Academic Freedom Monitor studies in various ways. This input concerns validating the studies' findings with regard to emerging threats and developments in academic freedom, as well as policy options to address them from the perspectives of the organisations they represent. The Sounding Board is composed of cross-sectorial European academic associations representing both education and research. The members of the Sounding Board have represented All European Academics (ALLEA), European Students Union (ESU), Initiative for Science in Europe (ISE), Young Academy of Europe (YAE), the European Council for Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers (Eurodoc), the League of European Research Universities (LERU), The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities (The Guild), Science Europe, Scholars at Risk (SAR), and the Conference of European Schools for Advanced Engineering Education and Research (CESAER).

Limitations

Due to the relatively limited time frame, size, and methodological approach of this study, there are certain limitations. The study is based on desk research, interviews, and expert input. This means the research team drew, amongst other things, on debates and issues that have been reported, debated or mentioned somewhere in the public sphere. Inherently, event-based data have certain limitations in terms of comparability, selection bias, etc. (see, e.g. Spannagel, 2020). Moreover, both the nature and existence of national debates about academic freedom are inextricably linked to the overall cultural and political context of the country in question. The occurrence of many public debates about academic freedom cannot therefore in itself be seen as a diagnosis for the general deterioration of academic freedom. The fact that there are many debates can also indicate a healthy climate in which the scope and limits of academic freedom are regularly discussed in an open and constructive setting. Therefore, the study is also based on interviews with academic experts and stakeholders in the selected countries.

Academic freedom is widely recognised as a fundamental value of contemporary higher education and research, and as a prerequisite for well-functioning democratic societies. However, in recent years, major concerns have been expressed by various stakeholders about the state of academic freedom in the European Union. The European Parliament annual Academic Freedom Monitor aims to improve the promotion and protection of academic freedom in the EU. The 2025 edition is organised in two parts.

The first part consists of an update of existing measures of academic freedom in all EU Member States, an updated overview of public debate and studies of the state of academic freedom in four selected EU Member States, and an examination of the EU's state of academic freedom in a global context.

The second part contains a thematic analysis of the potential impact of selected trends in academic freedom within the EU, namely political polarisation, recent developments in the US higher education and research system, the commercialisation of academia, and foreign interference.

Furthermore, EU-level policy options are proposed for possible legislative and non-legislative initiatives to enhance the support for academic freedom in the EU Member States.

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