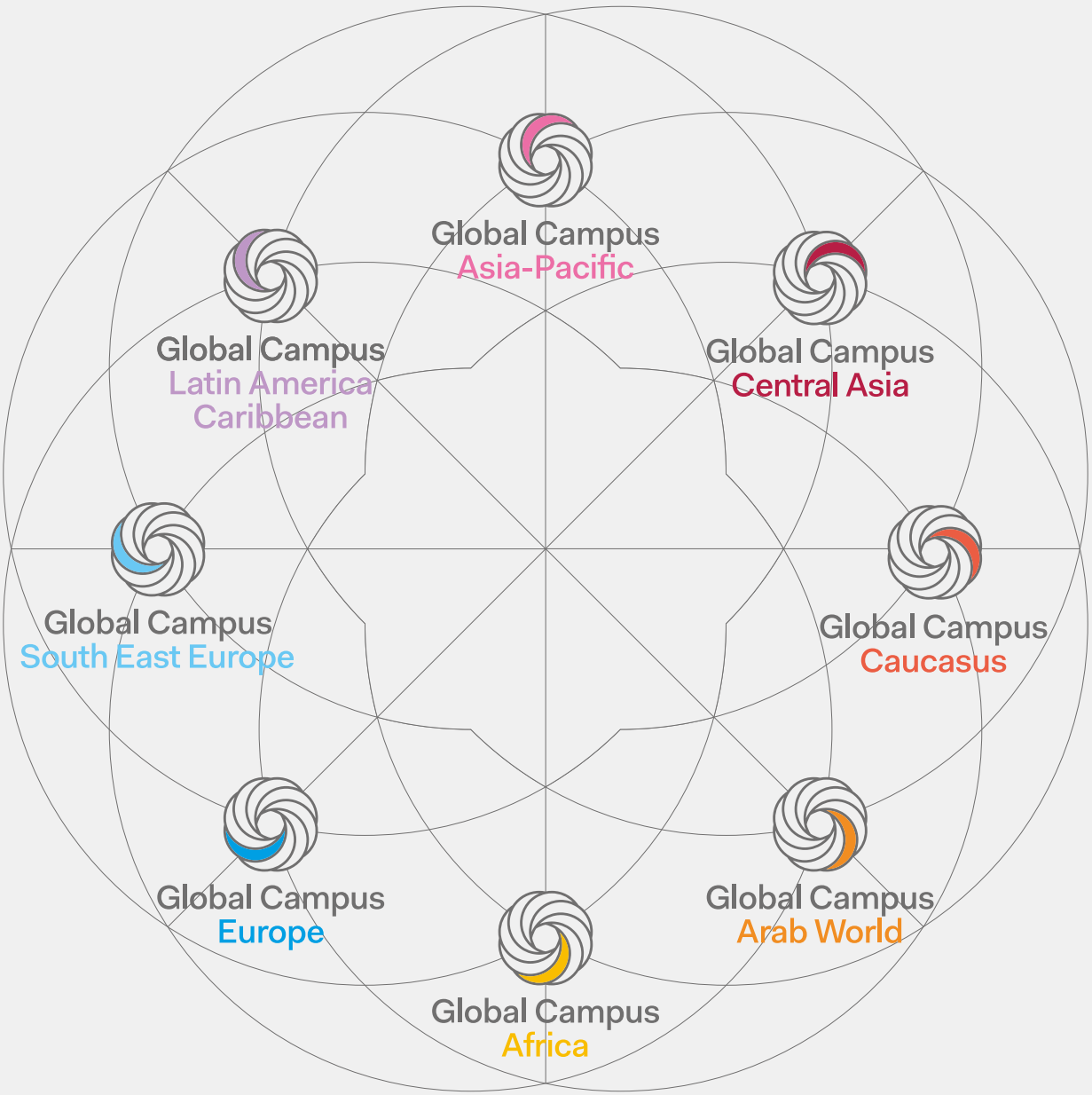
Global Campus Europe

Policy Briefs 2026

Nikolaos Sousos

Safeguarding the right to science through academic freedom: a human rights-based and action-oriented framework for Europe

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This policy brief is part of the **7th edition of the Global Campus Policy Observatory**, which revolves around the research project on 'Protecting, promoting and enjoying academic freedom: trends, challenges and impacts from a human rights-based approach', which was conceptualized and led by GC Research Manager Dr. Chiara Altafin and involves a team of eight policy analysts selected among alumn* of GC regional programmes, namely Meline Avagyan (CES - GC Caucasus), Anida Gjurgjiali (ERMA - GC South East Europe), Lakshita Kanhiya (HRDA - GC Africa), Luis Fernando Herrera Martínez (LATMA - GC Latin America and the Caribbean), Mostafa Masjedi Arani (ArMA - GC Arab World), Minh Nguyen (APMA - GC Asia Pacific), Dr. Nikolaos Sousos (EMA - GC Europe), and Akylai Tenizbaeva (MAHRS - GC Central Asia). Research outputs include workshop presentations, policy briefs, advocacy plans, and webinars held in cooperation with the GC E-Learning Department.

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This policy brief is produced with the financial assistance of the European Union and as part of the Global Campus of Human Rights. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of the authors and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union or of Global Campus of Human Rights.

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Safeguarding the right to science through academic freedom: a human rights-based and action-oriented framework for Europe

DOI https://doi.org/10.25330/3210

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Executive summary

Across Europe, academic freedom is increasingly affected by political pressures, governance challenges and structural inequalities that undermine the institutional conditions necessary for independent scientific research. These have direct implications for the effective realisation of the right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications under Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Academic freedom – including freedom of research, institutional autonomy, protection of scientific integrity and equitable access to scientific benefits – has been recognised as a core condition for the effective realisation of this right.

Within the European Union (EU), these standards are supported by legal and policy frameworks, including Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the European Research Area policies. However, the EU action in this field operates largely through coordination, monitoring and incentive-based governance rather than direct harmonisation. As a result, the effectiveness of academic freedom protection depends not only on formal legal recognition, but also on how consistently existing standards are implemented across research governance, rule-of-law monitoring and national institutional practice.

Monitoring evidence shows that the protection of academic freedom and the right to science remains uneven across member states despite shared legal commitments. Political interference in university governance, structural weaknesses in research systems, unequal access to scientific careers and digitally mediated forms of harassment increasingly undermine the institutional conditions necessary for independent research. Evidence from Hungary, Poland, Greece and France illustrates how these pressures can erode institutional autonomy, constrain research capacity and limit participation in scientific knowledge production.

This policy brief examines these developments and outlines two policy options: (1) a targeted, governance-focused approach centred on strengthening national safeguards for institutional autonomy and governance within existing frameworks; (2) a comprehensive rights-based EU strategy integrating monitoring, institutional protection and coordinated policy responses. The latter approach can address the systemic, cross-border and structural nature of current challenges and ensure the effective realisation of the right to science across Europe.

1 The author thanks Dr. Chiara Altafin, Research Manager at the Global Campus of Human Rights in Venice, Prof. Peter Maassen, Professor in Higher Education Studies at the Faculty of Education of the University of Oslo, and Prof. George Ulrich, Academic Director at the Global Campus of Human Rights, for their valuable and constructive feedback as received throughout the drafting process or in the context of the GC Policy Observatory workshop 'Protecting, promoting and enjoying academic freedom: trends, challenges and impacts from a human rights-based approach', held in Venice on 26 March 2026.

Introduction

The right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications is recognised in Article 15(1)(b) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which obliges states to respect, protect and fulfil conditions that enable scientific research, knowledge production and equitable access to its outcomes (ICESCR 1966). In its General Comment No 25, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) clarifies that the 'freedoms indispensable for scientific research', protected under Article 15(3) of the ICESCR, require protection of scientific freedom and institutional autonomy from undue interference. It further emphasises that states' obligations extend beyond refraining from interference and include measures necessary to ensure the availability, accessibility, quality and acceptability of scientific systems and scientific progress (CESCR 2020: paras 13–18); paragraph 52 elaborates states' core obligations stemming from the right to participate in and enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications. Similarly, UNESCO Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers (2017: paras 9 and 17–19) emphasises that freedom of research, freedom of expression and protection from political or economic interference are essential preconditions for responsible and socially beneficial science.

While closely interrelated, academic freedom and the right to science remain distinct under international human rights law. Academic freedom primarily protects the independence of researchers and institutions, whereas the right to science encompasses broader entitlements, relating to participation in, access to and equitable enjoyment of scientific progress and its applications (Donders 2011: 373–377). Academic freedom should therefore be understood as an indispensable component of the right to science, including as a precondition for the independent production and dissemination of scientific knowledge.

Against this normative background, academic freedom may be understood not only as an individual entitlement, but also as a broader institutional and societal condition enabling independent knowledge production, critical inquiry and public trust in scientific research. Its significance extends beyond professional autonomy alone. It appears as a functional condition for democratic governance, evidence-based policymaking, inclusive knowledge production and the social reliability of scientific inquiry.

Where scholars and institutions cannot pursue research freely, communicate findings openly or participate in international scientific exchange without fear of sanction, the quality, credibility and social legitimacy of scientific knowledge may also be undermined (CESCR 2020: paras 13 and 18; Kaye 2020: paras 13–17). Academic analysis has further examined the normative implications of General Comment No 25 for understanding the relationship between academic freedom, institutional autonomy and the broader right to science under Article 15 of the ICESCR (Mazibrada, Plozza and Porsdam Mann 2023).

Conceptually, academic freedom may be understood as encompassing both 'negative' freedom (protection from external interference) and 'positive' freedom (the conditions and resources necessary to conduct research), underscoring that effective protection depends not only on legal guarantees but also on the institutional and material environment in which science operates.

Academic freedom is closely connected also to a broader constellation of rights, including freedom of expression, the right to education and cultural rights (CESCR 2020: para 46; Kaye 2020: para 5; Shaheed 2024: para 10). These interconnections reflect the role of academic freedom as both an individual liberty and an institutional safeguard that enables independent inquiry, critical debate and the production of reliable knowledge (UNESCO 2017: paras 9 and 17–19; Shaheed 2024: paras 12–20).

Notably, the Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom, presented to the UN Human Rights Council, articulate nine core elements that clarify the content, scope and status of academic freedom (WGAF 2024: paras 5–6). Related appendix I provides considerations for evaluating the implementation of this right, while appendix II offers guidance on its implementation.

This policy brief focuses on the European Union (EU) as a regulatory and normative space in which academic freedom and the right to science are anchored in legal and policy frameworks. Article 13 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (CFR) explicitly guarantees that 'the arts and scientific research shall be free of constraint' and requires that academic freedom shall be respected. Nonetheless, this protection must be understood within the limits of EU competence; while education remains primarily

a member state responsibility, EU law assumes particular relevance where academic freedom intersects with scientific research, cross-border academic activity, EU funding or other matters falling within the scope of EU law. The European Research Area (ERA) agenda promotes open, collaborative and autonomous research systems across member states (European Commission 2025a; Council of the EU 2021: 2–4). The European Higher Education Area (EHEA), developed through the Bologna Process, provides a complementary forum for dialogue, peer learning and practice in higher education, where academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation and public responsibility for and of higher education are recognised as interconnected fundamental values (EHEA 2024). The protection is reinforced through the jurisprudence of the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), which contribute to defining academic freedom as a component of rule-of-law guarantees, for example in case law addressing restrictions on higher-education institutions and cross-border academic activity within the EU (CJEU 2020) or violations of freedom of expression and academic autonomy under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECtHR 2009).

The EU provides a relevant context because it combines strong rights-based commitments with increasing evidence of uneven implementation, political pressure and governance-related constraints affecting academic institutions in several member states. Recent mapping of national constitutional frameworks (Kosta and Ceran 2025), together with subsequent analysis of academic freedom trends across the EU (Maassen et al 2026), show that formal legal guarantees alone are insufficient in the absence of effective implementation mechanisms and robust institutional safeguards.

This policy brief adopts an explicitly action-oriented perspective: it seeks not merely to describe threats to academic freedom, but to translate human rights standards and corresponding public responsibilities into operational guidance for public authorities, higher-education institutions and research funders.

To illustrate how relevant dynamics operate in practice, the brief draws on selective case studies, which are not presented as exhaustive or exceptional cases, but as illustrative examples of broader patterns observed across Europe: **Hungary** highlights structural political interference and erosion of institutional autonomy through governance reforms affecting universities (CJEU 2020: paras 226–232; Venice Commission 2021: paras 70–84; Kinzelbach et al 2025: 14–16; European Commission 2025b: 23–26); **Poland** illustrates ideological pressure, disciplinary risks and politicisation of academic work in sensitive fields (SAR 2024: 28–31; European Commission 2025c: 18–21); **Greece** exemplifies structural constraints linked to chronic underfunding, centralised governance and precarity within academic institutions (OECD 2020: 41–46; European Commission 2025d: 6–9); and **France** demonstrates how securitisation narratives and political discourse can generate pressures on scholars working on migration, religion and social cohesion (SAR 2024: 34-36; European Commission 2025e: 7–9). At the normative level, similar concerns about harassment, intimidation and attacks targeting researchers and academics have been recognised in international discussions on freedom of opinion and expression, including when addressing threats affecting academics and scientific inquiry (Kaye 2020: paras 1–5 and 13–17).

To further contextualise these dynamics, the brief makes selective reference to developments in the **United Kingdom**, particularly the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, as a contextual comparator. This legislation illustrates how policy frameworks centred narrowly on ‘free speech’ may diverge from comprehensive, rights-based protections of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. For broader comparative context, the analysis draws on research on academic freedom protections in the UK and Europe (Karran and Mallinson 2017). For specific implications of the 2023 Act, it draws on McGoldrick’s legal analysis (McGoldrick 2024).

Finally, this policy brief responds to the growing recognition that academic freedom has become a timely and contested issue across Europe. Global monitoring tools such as the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) show a measurable decline in academic freedom protections in several countries over the past decade (Kinzelbach et al 2025: 6–9). Scholars at Risk documents increasing incidents of harassment, legal pressure and institutional interference affecting researchers worldwide, including in EU member states (SAR 2024: 135–141). These trends intersect with wider processes of democratic backsliding, political polarisation, digital surveillance and broader geopolitical developments. European Parliament analysis further identifies commercialisation pressures and foreign interference as emerging risks affecting academic freedom, underscoring the urgency of developing a coherent, rights-based EU strategy to safeguard the conditions necessary for the realisation of the right to science (Maassen et al 2026).

Problem description

Given that academic freedom functions as a key enabling condition for the effective realisation of the right to science under Article 15(1)(b) of the ICESCR, threats are not only higher-education governance concerns but also directly affect the conditions necessary for independent knowledge production, equitable participation in research, scientific integrity and reliability of scientific knowledge for public decision-making (CESCR 2020: paras 13, 16, 18 and 52). Various interconnected pressures affecting the institutional conditions necessary for independent scientific inquiry deserve particular attention in the European context.

a. Pressures on academic freedom

Academic freedom is increasingly shaped by structural and political pressures that affect university governance, research independence and the autonomy of scholars in the EU (Maassen et al 2025a: S28-S36; SAR 2024). These pressures are not uniform across member states, but they reveal recurring patterns of interference that undermine the conditions necessary for the realisation of the right to science.

Key challenges include political interference in university governance and erosion of institutional autonomy, structural and governance-related constraints on research systems, unequal access to scientific opportunities, digital surveillance and online harassment, and pressures on politically sensitive research.

To illustrate different modalities through which academic freedom and the right to science may be affected within the European research area, the following case studies highlight distinct but interconnected **patterns of risk**. **Hungary** illustrates structural political interference affecting institutional autonomy; **Poland** demonstrates ideological and disciplinary pressures on scholars working in politically sensitive fields; **Greece** highlights structural constraints linked to research funding, governance centralisation and academic career precarity; and **France** illustrates emerging risks associated with digital harassment and securitised public discourse affecting academic research.

A first pattern of risk concerns structural political interference in university governance. **Hungary** provides a particularly clear example. Higher-education governance has been fundamentally restructured through the transfer of public universities to so-called 'public interest trust foundations', and these arrangements have been widely criticised for weakening institutional autonomy and entrenching political influence over research priorities, staffing and strategic direction, thereby affecting the institutional conditions required for the production of independent scientific knowledge (CJEU 2020; Venice Commission 2021: paras 70–84; Kinzelbach et al 2025: 14–16; European Commission 2025b: 23–26). Scholars have similarly highlighted how governance reforms affecting universities have become intertwined with broader patterns of democratic backsliding and political control over knowledge institutions (Enyedi 2018; Pető 2021). In *Case C-66/18*, the CJEU confirmed that Hungary had violated EU law in relation to restrictions affecting academic institutions, underscoring the role of EU legal mechanisms in protecting academic freedom and institutional autonomy as components of the freedom of science under Article 13 of the CFR (CJEU 2020: paras 226–232). These developments illustrate how governance reforms affecting universities can undermine the structural conditions necessary for independent research and for the effective realisation of the right to science. Comparative legal analysis further shows that the Hungarian case raises broader questions about the institutional dimension of academic freedom and the extent to which EU law can safeguard academic autonomy when national governance reforms weaken constitutional and institutional protections (Kosta and Ceran 2025: 37–41).

A second pattern concerns ideological and disciplinary pressures targeting specific fields of scholarship. **Poland** illustrates this dynamic. Scholars working on constitutional law, gender studies, migration and contemporary history have faced political scrutiny, disciplinary investigations and public attacks framed in moral or national security terms (SAR 2024: 28–31). The European Commission's Rule of Law reporting highlights concerns regarding politicisation of public institutions and the chilling effect this may have on academic expression and research independence (European Commission 2025c: 18–21). Scholarship analysing governance reforms and institutional change in Central and Eastern European higher education systems further notes that politicisation pressures and disciplinary risks can reshape academic incentives, discourage critical scholarship and weaken the autonomy of research institutions (Kwiek 2019). Such pressures undermine independent scientific inquiry and the right to science, which requires that research be conducted and communicated free from political interference (CESCR 2020: paras 13 and 18).

Beyond country-specific governance, a broader EU-wide pattern is emerging in which funding mechanisms are strategically used to influence research priorities. Public research funding increasingly relies on competitive, project-based models that may be vulnerable to political steering, selective allocation or ideological conditionality. The European Commission's rule of law report notes risks related to transparency and independence in the allocation of public resources in several member states (European Commission 2025f: 2–6). Scholars at Risk similarly documents how institutional and political pressures can undermine academic freedom, including through measures affecting research agendas and institutional autonomy (SAR 2024: 135–147).

Administrative and legal barriers further compound these pressures by restricting cross-border academic collaboration and researcher mobility within the EU. These include burdensome visa regimes, security-screening procedures, limitations on institutional partnerships and administrative obstacles to recognising qualifications or accessing funding. Such barriers are particularly visible where political control over academia has intensified, but they also affect member states facing structural capacity constraints, such as **Greece** (OECD 2020: 41–46; European Commission 2025d: 6–9; European Commission 2025a).

In other contexts, including **France**, pressures on academic freedom emerge less through formal governance restructuring and more through securitised political discourse, reputational targeting and public controversies surrounding particular fields of research, especially those relating to migration, religion, security and social cohesion (SAR 2024: 34–36; European Commission 2025e: 7–9).

Together, these patterns reveal that academic freedom is not primarily curtailed through overt legal prohibitions, but through governance restructuring, ideological pressure, financial steering and administrative constraints. This creates a fragmented protection landscape in which formal legal commitments coexist with practices that gradually erode institutional autonomy and the independence of scientific activity. This fragmentation is reinforced by differences in constitutional design: several member states protect academic freedom only indirectly (e.g., via freedom of expression or the right to education), while others include explicit autonomy/science clauses, complicating common EU operational standards (Kosta and Ceran 2025).

b. Unequal access to science and participation

Unequal access to science and participation in knowledge production remains a persistent structural problem across the EU. Although academic freedom is formally guaranteed, its practical enjoyment is deeply conditioned by socioeconomic status, migration background, gender, disability, language and geographic location. These factors shape who is able to enter academic careers, secure stable employment, access research funding, participate in international collaboration and benefit from scientific progress.

Multiple datasets show systematic disparities in access to higher education and research careers. Women and other underrepresented groups remain less visible in senior academic positions and agenda-setting roles (European Commission 2021: 6–11; EIGE 2023: 49–56). Language barriers, concentration of research infrastructure in metropolitan centres and unequal access to international mobility opportunities further entrench these divides (OECD 2020: 41–46).

Greece provides a particularly illustrative case of how structural constraints can affect equitable access to scientific careers and research resources. OECD analysis highlights persistent system-level pressures relevant to academic careers and institutional capacity, including governance centralisation, resource limitations and funding constraints that shape opportunity structures within the higher-education system (OECD 2020: 41–46). These factors affect academic career stability and research resources, shaping universities' capacity to sustain independent research environments (European Commission 2025d: 6–9). Such structural constraints also have measurable implications for both inclusion and academic freedom, as they affect who can participate in scientific work and under what conditions research can be conducted independently (Kinzelbach et al 2025: 18–19). Ensuring equitable participation in scientific research is a core component of the right to science, which requires states to create enabling conditions for access to scientific careers and knowledge production (CESCR 2020: para 18). The Greek experience therefore illustrates that academic freedom cannot be safeguarded without sustained public investment, fair and stable employment conditions and governance arrangements that avoid excessive centralisation. Comparative constitutional analysis further suggests that effective protection of academic freedom in Greece must be understood in relation to the broader constitutional and institutional framework shaping the autonomy of universities (Kosta and Ceran 2025).

Across EU member states, unequal participation in knowledge production also translates into unequal benefit-sharing from scientific progress. Marginalised communities are less likely to be represented in agenda-setting and less likely to access the social benefits generated by scientific innovation – undermining the collective dimension of the right to science, which requires equitable participation in and access to outcomes (UNESCO 2017: paras 9 and 17–19; CESCR 2020: para 16).

c. New and evolving risks

Beyond traditional forms of direct state interference, academic freedom in the EU is increasingly shaped by indirect and structurally mediated pressures (Maassen et al 2025a: S34–S36; SAR 2024: 28–36). European Parliament analysis similarly identifies commercialisation pressures, foreign interference and wider geopolitical developments as emerging challenges (Maassen et al 2026). These include dependencies on external funding, reputational dynamics amplified through digital and social media environments, securitisation narratives framing certain fields of research as politically sensitive or socially contentious and growing pressures affecting international scientific cooperation.

Operating through online spaces, digital infrastructures and diffuse political discourse, these pressures are often technologically mediated rather than legally codified, yet they can generate significant chilling effects on researchers' safety, autonomy and willingness to engage in critical inquiry. These 'chilling effects' – widely documented in academic freedom research – operate by shaping behaviour through perceived, rather than formally imposed, constraints (Maassen et al 2025a: S34–S36; SAR 2024: 28–36; Wieviorka 2022; Joly 2022). While they do not necessarily take the form of formal restrictions, they can nonetheless foster conditions of self-censorship and 'anticipatory compliance', whereby researchers adjust their behaviour in response to perceived institutional, political or reputational risks. These dynamics also raise concerns of epistemic justice, as they influence which forms of knowledge are recognised as legitimate, which research agendas receive support, and whose perspectives are represented in public and policy debates. From a right to science perspective, this has implications not only for researchers, but also for the broader public, as it affects the ability of individuals and communities to participate meaningfully in the production, direction and application of scientific knowledge.

A growing body of evidence documents the expansion of digital surveillance and online harassment of researchers, involving both state and non-state actors, which can create chilling effects even where formal legal protections exist, with digital threats or risks affecting educational institutions, staff and students (Shaheed 2024: para 62; FRA 2022: 15–22; FRA 2024a: 37–41). In addition, legal intimidation and litigation-style pressure – often discussed in terms of SLAPP-type dynamics – can be directed at academics and institutions, compounding reputational and personal risks (CoE 2025a: 1–4).

In **Poland**, researchers critical of government policies have been targeted through online intimidation, reputational attacks and complaints procedures that draw on digital evidence and social media activity (SAR 2024: 28–31; Kinzelbach et al 2025: 6–9). Similar patterns have been observed in **France**, where academics researching migration, religion, state security and/or postcolonial studies have faced heightened scrutiny and harassment, amplified through political and media discourse. Public controversies surrounding concepts such as 'Islamo-leftism' in universities have contributed to a climate in which certain areas of research are portrayed as politically suspect or incompatible with national security narratives. Scholars at Risk documented incidents involving public attacks, institutional pressure and campaigns targeting academics working in these fields (SAR 2024: 34–36). Scholars analysing knowledge politics and higher-education debates in contemporary France similarly highlight how politicised public discourse, securitisation framings and attacks on particular fields of inquiry can create a hostile environment for scholars even in a formally democratic context, particularly affecting researchers working on race, religion, migration and postcolonial studies (Wieviorka 2022; Joly 2022; Gready and Jackson 2025). Such dynamics can generate chilling effects on research agendas and public engagement by scholars, contributing to conditions that discourage critical inquiry and narrow the space for open academic debate (Wieviorka 2022; Joly 2022; Maassen et al 2025a: S34–S36).

Together, these developments illustrate how contemporary threats to academic freedom within the EU range from **direct** institutional and political interference to more **indirect**, structurally mediated, digitally amplified and reputational forms of pressure that may constrain research agendas and discourage critical inquiry even in formally democratic settings. These trends also intersect with broader challenges of digital governance and civic space protection. EU fundamental rights monitoring underscores that digital threats and harassment can constrain

civic space and participation, creating specific vulnerabilities for those engaged in public-interest research and academic debate (FRA 2022: 15–22; FRA 2024a: 37–41; FRA 2024b: 8–10).

d. Divergent policy trajectories

The **United Kingdom**'s Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 provides an important comparative reference point for understanding different regulatory approaches to academic freedom. While presented as a mechanism to strengthen freedom of expression on campus, critics argue that the Act risks reframing academic freedom primarily as an individual free speech entitlement enforced through regulatory oversight and litigation, rather than as a structural condition grounded in institutional autonomy and collective scholarly independence (United Kingdom Government 2023; McGoldrick 2024; Karran and Mallinson 2017). Such an approach may unintentionally incentivise defensive governance practices, legal risk management and regulatory formalism, potentially undermining the substantive conditions necessary for independent teaching and research.

By contrast, the CoE and EU traditions frame academic freedom primarily as a human right embedded within a broader ecosystem of institutional autonomy, democratic governance and collective scholarly independence. In particular, CoE Committee of Ministers' Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7 emphasises higher-education institutions' autonomy and public authorities' responsibilities to protect academic freedom and institutional autonomy (CoE 2012: paras 6–8), while Article 13 of the CFR explicitly protects academic freedom. Although protection varies across national constitutional traditions, EU legal scholarship increasingly understands Article 13 as protecting both individual research and teaching freedom and institutional autonomy as conditions for independent scientific inquiry (Kosta and Ceran 2025; Ceran 2025).

Rationale for action

Without academic freedom, the right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications under Article 15 of the ICESCR cannot be effectively realised (CESCR 2020: paras 13 and 52). Academic freedom safeguards the conditions necessary for independent scientific inquiry, scientific integrity and reliable knowledge production, and is therefore essential for democratic and evidence-based policymaking. Universities play a distinctive role in sustaining democratic knowledge systems, functioning not only as sites of research and teaching but also as institutional spaces that can support public debate, protect knowledge production and contribute to the resilience of democratic societies (Gready and Jackson 2025).

At the EU level, the protection of academic freedom is grounded in Article 13 of the CFR and reinforced through the ERA framework. The ERA Policy Agenda 2025–2027 emphasises open and excellent science, research careers, cross-border collaboration, knowledge circulation and resilient research systems as core priorities for the European Research Area (European Commission 2025a; Council of the EU 2021: 2–4). Council of Europe standards and policy instruments further clarify public authorities' responsibilities to safeguard academic freedom, institutional autonomy and the democratic mission of higher education (e.g., CoE 2012: paras 6–8).

However, monitoring evidence demonstrates that the application of existing standards remains uneven and, in some contexts, is deteriorating. Their integration across governance tools is also insufficient. The EU rule-of-law monitoring continues to identify significant challenges relating to checks and balances and institutional resilience across member states (European Commission 2025f: 2–6), while comparative academic-freedom monitoring and quantitative indicators also document declining or uneven protection of academic freedom within parts of the EU (Kinzelbach et al: 6–9; EPRS 2026: 12–18).

Failure to address these trends carries tangible and escalating risks:

- **Emerging pressures on public trust in science and universities:** while trust in science remains comparatively resilient in Europe, the increasing politicisation of higher-education governance and the framing of scientific expertise as 'ideological' risk gradually undermines confidence in

academic institutions. Where higher-education governance becomes politicised and scientific expertise is publicly contested in these terms, trust in universities and knowledge institutions can erode over time. In **Hungary** and **Poland**, sustained political interference in university governance, regulatory frameworks and research agendas has contributed to chilling effects on critical scholarship (SAR 2024: 16–23; European Commission 2025b: 12–15; European Commission 2025c: 10–14).

- **Reduced quality and independence of scientific advice:** where research systems are chronically underfunded, academic careers are precarious and governance structures are highly centralised, long-term research capacity and the independence of scientific advice are weakened. **Greece** illustrates how persistent underinvestment and constrained career pathways can undermine institutional resilience and narrow who can realistically participate in scientific work (OECD 2020: 41–47; European Commission 2025d: 6–9).

- **Marginalisation in scientific knowledge production**: when academic environments are shaped by harassment, reputational targeting or politically charged scrutiny – especially in research concerning migration, religion, security, gender or social cohesion – researchers may become discouraged from pursuing or disseminating work in these fields, while scholars and communities already facing marginalisation may be disproportionately affected. As participation and diversity of perspectives narrow, so too does the inclusiveness of scientific knowledge production. **France** illustrates how discursive pressure and securitisation-adjacent narratives can generate such chilling effects (SAR 2024: 34–36; European Commission 2025e: 7–9).

Together, these trends show that academic freedom is not a static legal guarantee but a fragile institutional condition that requires active, systemic protection. Fragmented or reactive measures have proven insufficient when pressures are structural, cross-border and intertwined with wider democratic backsliding and digitally mediated intimidation.

The EU is uniquely positioned to respond through existing research funding programmes, ERA and rule-of-law governance instruments, that already support coordination and institutional cooperation across member states. The ERA Policy Agenda 2025–2027 and the Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe further provides governance and coordination mechanisms supporting implementation across national systems (European Commission 2025a; Council of the EU 2021: 2–4). Simultaneously, the EU's rule of law monitoring cycle provides an institutional mechanism for identifying systemic risks affecting democratic governance and institutional independence within member states (European Commission 2025f: 1–5). More broadly, this monitoring highlights structural challenges affecting institutional capacity, administrative effectiveness and public trust, which shape the broader enabling environment within which universities and research organisations operate.

Acting now therefore means moving beyond symbolic commitments towards a coherent, rights-based strategy that treats academic freedom as a prerequisite for democratic resilience, scientific integrity and the effective realisation of the right to science throughout Europe. In a shifting global context where the protection of academic freedom is becoming more uneven across regions, Europe increasingly represents a central normative space for the promotion of academic freedom as a human right.

Policy options

Against this background, this brief outlines alternative policy pathways for strengthening academic freedom and safeguarding the right to science in the EU. It examines different governance approaches and argues for a comprehensive human-rights-based EU strategy that reinforces legal safeguards, monitoring and inclusive governance mechanisms.
Such an approach is grounded in international human rights law (particularly ICESCR 1966 and CESCR 2020), Council of Europe standards (especially CoE 2012) and the EU's constitutional and research-policy commitments (European Commission 2025a; Council of the EU 2021: 2–4).

The following policy options are derived from the governance challenges and policy gaps examined above. Each option is assessed against: (1) compliance with international and European human rights

obligations; (2) effectiveness in safeguarding institutional autonomy and academic freedom; (3) capacity to address structural inequalities in access to science and participation; and (4) feasibility and enforceability within existing EU legal and governance frameworks. Two main policy trajectories can be identified.

Option 1: Targeted strengthening of institutional autonomy and governance

This scenario adopts an incremental, governance-focused approach centred on strengthening legal and procedural safeguards for institutional autonomy at national level, reinforcing transparency and accountability in governance and funding, and expanding support for mobility and cross-border collaboration. Several European systems already illustrate elements of this approach. For example, **Germany**'s constitutional protection of academic freedom under article 5(3) of the Basic Law has long been interpreted as safeguarding both individual scholarly freedom and institutional autonomy, while higher-education governance models in **Finland** and **Sweden** emphasise legally protected university autonomy combined with public accountability mechanisms (Karran and Mallinson 2017; Maassen et al 2025b).

Such measures could improve resilience within national higher-education systems and address governance weaknesses identified in several EU member states. However, while these reforms strengthen safeguards, they remain limited in addressing academic freedom as entailing enforceable human-rights obligations upon states and public authorities across the EU. They may, therefore, only partially address structural inequalities, digital threats and cross-border coordination gaps affecting the right to science (European Commission 2025a; Council of the EU 2021: 2–4).

Assessment: Option 1 represents a meaningful improvement in governance safeguards but may remain fragmented and insufficient against systematic and politically entrenched forms of erosion.

Option 2: Comprehensive human rights-based EU strategy

This scenario seeks to strengthen the protection of academic freedom and the implementation of the right to science within the EU governance and research-policy mechanisms. It builds on the CESCR's recognition that the freedoms indispensable for scientific research require protection from undue interference and form part of the broader conditions necessary for scientific progress and its societal benefits (CESCR 2020: paras 13 and 52; UNESCO 2017). Accordingly, this option integrates equality, non-discrimination, participation, transparency and accountability as core human rights principles within academic freedom policy design and implementation.

Operationally, this approach builds on the EU's established 'open method of coordination' – a governance approach based on voluntary cooperation, benchmarking and mutual learning among member states (European Council 2000) – enabling structured dialogue among member states, research institutions and relevant stakeholders to develop shared standards, monitor progress and promote convergence without requiring full legislative harmonisation. In this context, academic freedom is recognised both as an individual right (e.g., for students and professors) and a collective institutional good (e.g., for universities), requiring coordinated protection at system level and sustained cooperation across governance layers.

The forthcoming ERA Act may further strengthen this approach by providing a more coherent legislative framework for the free movement of researchers, scientific knowledge and technology ('the fifth freedom'). If adopted as proposed, it could offer an opportunity to embed academic freedom more systematically within EU research governance and thereby reinforce the institutional conditions necessary for the effective realisation of the right to science (European Commission 2026).

Key elements of this approach include:

i. **EU-level monitoring, reporting and early-warning mechanisms on academic freedom and the right to science**, integrated into existing and emerging EU governance processes. In particular, such mechanisms could be linked to the ERA policy framework, the forthcoming ERA Act and the EU rule of law monitoring cycle, which already provide institutional platforms for tracking systemic risks affecting research systems and democratic governance (European Commission 2025f; European Commission 2025a).

ii. **Safeguards for institutional autonomy, protection of researchers, digital threats affecting researchers and international scientific cooperation**, reflecting international standards that emphasise the need to protect both the freedom of scientific research and the institutional conditions necessary for its

exercise (CESCR 2020: paras 13 and 52; UNESCO 2017). Emerging evidence on digital harassment and pressures affecting civic space further highlights the need for protective mechanisms for researchers engaged in public-interest scholarship (FRA 2022). In the research-funding domain, the European Parliament has examined how Horizon Europe's recital safeguards relating to academic freedom could be operationalised more concretely in practice (Blasi 2024).

iii. **Coordinated response mechanisms** when EU member states undermine academic freedom, including use of existing legal and financial tools where appropriate. Such mechanisms could build on instruments already visible in the EU rule-of-law and enforcement landscape, including infringement proceedings and broader monitoring tools. The judgement in *Commission v Hungary* (CJEU 2020) illustrates how EU legal mechanisms can be used to address measures affecting academic freedom, while the annual rule of law reporting cycle provides an institutional platform for identifying and monitoring systemic risks (European Commission 2025f).

iv. **Operational 'how-to' lessons** from other regulated research domains that have translated broad equity and participation principles into concrete governance requirements. In particular, policymakers may draw on established regulatory approaches developed in fields such as health and clinical research (WHO 2014; ICH 2021; FDA 2020; FDA 2024). These instruments illustrate how broad normative commitments can be operationalised through governance, funding and compliance mechanisms without compromising scientific excellence or regulatory rigour. They are referenced here as implementation analogies rather than legal authorities for academic freedom.

Assessment: Option 2 is the only scenario that fully addresses the systemic, cross-border and structural nature of current threats to academic freedom and the right to science through coordinated standards at EU level, monitoring and enforceability, while aligning with international human rights law, an emerging interpretive guidance on implementation and EU constitutional values. In particular, the cited Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom provide key operational guidance on institutional autonomy, protection from political interference, participation in scientific life and safeguards necessary for independent research within democratic societies (WGAF 2024).

Policy recommendations

The following recommendations translate the human-rights principles and empirical findings discussed in the preceding sections into concrete governance measures for strengthening the institutional conditions necessary for the effective realisation of the right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications in the EU. They focus on practical and action-oriented steps that can reinforce academic freedom as an essential institutional condition for independent scientific inquiry, democratic knowledge production and equitable participation in research. Implementing a comprehensive rights-based strategy requires coordinated action by EU institutions, member states, higher education institutions and research funders.

To European Commission, European Parliament, Council of the EU and relevant agencies:

- Develop a dedicated and coherent framework on academic freedom and the right to science within the ERA, including through the forthcoming ERA Act, by explicitly recognising academic freedom as a requirement for the effective realisation of the right to science and integrating its protection into EU governance instruments, including the rule of law mechanism, ERA policy agendas and EU research funding programmes.

- Support independent monitoring, data collection and reporting on academic freedom and the right to science across the EU, building on existing instruments such as the rule of law reporting cycle, the AFI, the European Parliament's Academic Freedom Monitor and structured engagement

with independent organisations that monitor risks affecting researchers and higher-education institutions, such as Scholars at Risk.

- Make systematic use of existing European cooperation frameworks, including the ERA and the EHEA, to promote peer learning, exchange of good practices and greater convergence in implementing academic freedom, institutional autonomy and the right to science across European research and higher education systems.

- Systematically incorporate academic freedom safeguards in EU research funding programmes, including Horizon Europe and future research programmes, as well as into international scientific cooperation agreements.

- Provide clearer operational guidance on how funding rules, evaluation procedures, ethical review criteria and institutional eligibility requirements can explicitly address risks to institutional autonomy, researcher protection and freedom of inquiry, ensuring that funding governance does not indirectly enable political interference, restrictions on dissemination or discrimination in access to research opportunities.

To EU member states:

- Protect – in compliance with legally binding international and European human rights standards – academic freedom, institutional autonomy, freedom of expression in academic contexts and the right to science, including the conditions necessary for independent research, participation in scientific life and equitable access to the benefits of scientific progress. These protections should be embedded in national legislation and policy frameworks providing effective safeguards and consistent with European constitutional traditions.

- Actively protect independence, pluralism and non-discrimination in national higher education and research governance frameworks, safeguarding universities and research organisations from political interference in governance structures, senior appointments, funding allocation and decisions concerning curricula or research agendas.

- Provide effective legal and practical protection for academics and students, including emergency support mechanisms, access to legal assistance, protection from harassment and intimidation, safeguards against politically motivated disciplinary proceedings and measures to ensure personal safety and professional integrity.

- Actively cooperate with existing European initiatives supporting researchers at risk, including schemes facilitating temporary relocation, institutional hosting and cross-border academic protection mechanisms (EUA 2025).

- Ensure the material conditions necessary for scientific independence and the effective realisation of the right to science. Academic freedom cannot be safeguarded without sustained public investment in research systems, fair and stable employment conditions for researchers and governance arrangements that avoid excessive administrative centralisation. Structural weaknesses in research funding, career stability and institutional capacity can undermine universities' resilience and restrict who can realistically participate in scientific knowledge production, thereby limiting the effective realisation of the right to science.

- More broadly, devote attention to the institutional environment in which science operates, because persistent challenges in public-sector capacity, administrative effectiveness and public trust can shape the conditions under which universities and research organisations function. Addressing these structural factors is essential for ensuring that formal legal guarantees of academic freedom translate into meaningful protection of independent research and equitable participation in science.

To higher education institutions and research organisations:

- As guardians of academic freedom and scientific integrity, adopt internal policies that give practical effect to equality, participation, transparency and accountability into governance and decision-making, treating academic freedom as an institutional responsibility.

- Establish safe, confidential reporting channels for interference, harassment, censorship or political pressure, and ensure complaints are handled without retaliation, with clear procedures for investigating such cases and protecting affected individuals for maintaining trust in institutional governance.

- Actively promote inclusive participation in research and academic careers, addressing structural barriers affecting underrepresented groups,

including unequal access to funding, precarious employment conditions, and exclusion from decision-making structures, to ensure that the benefits and opportunities of scientific research are broadly shared.

- Request to be systematically supported as collective actors capable of strengthening advocacy for academic freedom, facilitating the exchange of best practices and contributing to transnational support and protection mechanisms for researchers at risk.

To research funders (public and private):

- Bearing responsibility to ensure full transparency and accountability in funding governance, including clear disclosure of funding sources, decision-making processes and contractual conditions, avoid funding arrangements that may create direct or indirect pressure on research agendas, methodologies, data interpretation or publication practices.

- Safeguard the independence of research design and dissemination as an essential aspect for protecting both academic freedom and the integrity of scientific inquiry.

- Integrate considerations on academic freedom and the right to science into funding risk assessments, due diligence procedures and ethical review processes. This includes evaluating risks related to political interference, contractual restrictions on dissemination, digital surveillance, conflicts of interest and coordinated harassment or intimidation of researchers.

Conclusion

Academic freedom is not a peripheral professional entitlement but a foundational condition for democratic governance, scientific integrity and the effective realisation of the right to science. As this brief demonstrates, current threats within the EU are multifaceted and mutually reinforcing. These include political interference in university governance, structural underinvestment and precarity, unequal access to scientific careers and digitally mediated forms of intimidation and control. While the EU benefits from a strong normative framework, formal legal protections alone are insufficient where implementation is uneven and institutional safeguards are weakened in practice. The key policy challenge is therefore not to reaffirm academic freedom as a principle, but to strengthen the operationalisation of human rights commitments and constitutional protections through coherent governance structures, funding systems, monitoring and accountability mechanisms and institutional safeguards across the European research and higher-education landscape.

Addressing these challenges requires a shift from fragmented and reactive responses towards a coherent, rights-based approach that recognises academic freedom both as an individual and institutional guarantee and as a public good essential for independent inquiry, inclusive participation and trustworthy knowledge production. In this sense, protecting academic freedom is not only a sectoral concern but a broader democratic imperative: it ensures that European societies retain the capacity to generate, scrutinise and apply knowledge in the public interest, consistent with the effective realisation of the right to science and the EU's broader commitments to democratic governance, scientific cooperation and rights-based research systems.

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Supported by