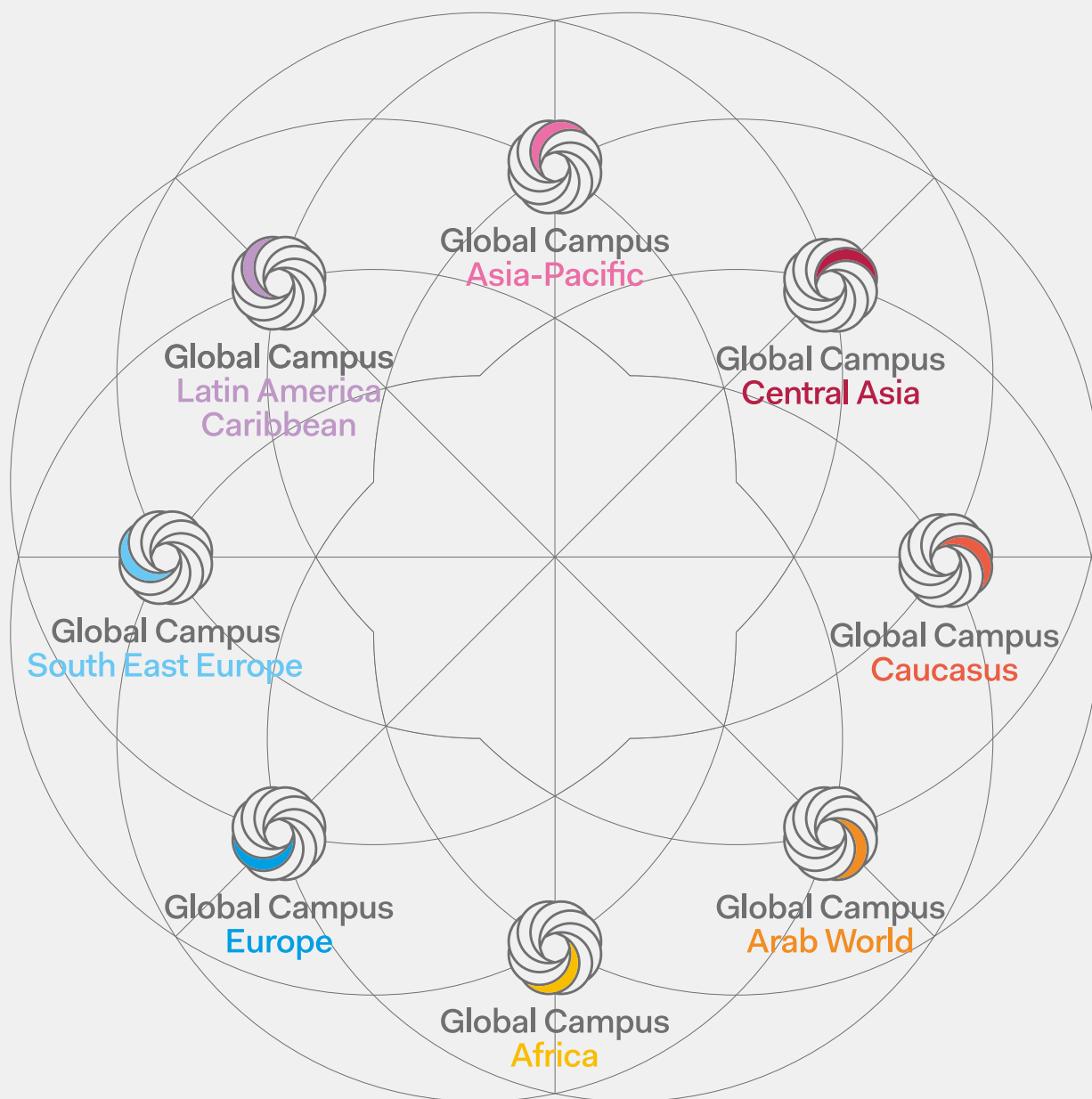

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Protecting and promoting academic freedom in Southeast Europe: a human rights-based analysis of challenges and solutions





Global Campus of Human Rights

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Protecting and promoting academic freedom in Southeast Europe: a human rights-based analysis of challenges and solutions

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Executive summary

Academic freedom across Southeast Europe (SEE), particularly in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia, remains systematically constrained by political interference, leadership capture, institutional autonomy limits, corruption/clientelism, financial dependency and research underfunding, politicisation of knowledge and curriculum, and shrinking democratic space for critical thought, undermining universities' capacity for independent inquiry, quality education, innovation and democratic resilience. This policy brief, based upon a human rights-based approach, analyses these threats through the lens of international human rights law, including binding treaties and the more recent Working Group on Academic Freedom's nine Principles, to assess gaps between formal legal guarantees and practical implementation. Serbia faces acute political capture, Bosnia and Herzegovina grapples with constitutional fragmentation, Kosovo structural politicisation and Albania persistent executive influence despite reforms, highlighting that all four countries share implementation deficits that weaken higher education quality and regional democracy. The brief argues reform is both urgent and feasible, presenting three models, Nordic 'onion-model' layers, Montenegro legislative fortification and Estonian political pluralism, that offer actionable pathways. Key recommendations call for governments to entrench merit-based autonomy and depoliticise accreditation; universities to adopt Academic Freedom Charters and independent ombudspersons; civil society to monitor interference; and regional actors to leverage conditionality. These measures would align SEE higher education with human rights obligations, retain talent and strengthen democratic stability across the region.

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The academic finding from Zgaga (2017) in ‘Bologna in the Western Balkans: Reconsideration on Higher Education Reforms in the region’ emphasises that academic freedom, institutional autonomy and accountability are fundamental aspects for determining the structure of a national higher education system. Although normative standards which developed within both political frameworks (such as the Bologna Process) and academic platforms (including the Magna Charta Universitatum) have been formally incorporated into the national legislation of all countries in the Southeast Europe (SEE) region, their practical implementation has generated diverse interpretations shaped by each country’s specific political, institutional and educational contexts, extending beyond broad principles to the structural and operational design of higher-education systems themselves (Zgaga 2017).

Higher education in SEE has expanded significantly over the past decades, yet the region continues to face persistent challenges in protecting academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The historical legacies of conflict, ethnic divisions and political centralisation have shaped university governance, research priorities and public discourse, creating an environment where academic inquiry can be constrained. Within this regional context, **specific pressures vary across countries**. In Serbia, political interference in university appointments, funding, and research agendas undermines institutional independence (EUA 2025); Bosnia and Herzegovina’s higher-education system reflects structural and ethnic fragmentation, which limits both governance capacity and curricular autonomy (ECPMF et al 2024). Kosovo’s institutions struggle with structural politicisation and low transparency in management (Qorraj, Krasniqi and Jusufi 2022); while Albania presents a reformist trajectory: legislative modernisation and European Union (EU)-alignment efforts coexist with continued executive influence over university governance (US Department of State 2025). Taken together, these cases illustrate a spectrum of challenges that impede academic freedom in SEE and highlight the need for targeted policy interventions. Under international human rights law academic freedom is recognised as, *inter alia*, an essential component of the right to freedom of opinion and expression (Kaye 2020: paras 15–20), the right to education (CESCR 1999: paras 38–40; Shaheed 2024: paras 30–41), and the right to access to, participate in and enjoy science (CESCR 2020: paras 13, 22 and 46).

This policy brief adopts a qualitative, case-study and comparative approach, integrating an analysis of legislative frameworks, institutional policies and expert perspectives from academia and civil society. Central to this inquiry is a **human rights-based approach**, which assesses academic freedom not merely as a professional privilege, but as a legal dimension required for the effective enjoyment of other fundamental rights enshrined in international treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), particularly Article 19, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), particularly Articles 13 and 15. This brief also draws on the Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom, presented *inter alia* at the UN Human Rights Council’s 53rd session and adopted by the international Working Group on Academic Freedom (WGAF 2024). The UN Human Rights Council’s Resolution 59/9, adopted without a vote during its 59th session, also took note with appreciation of these Principles (UNHRC 2025: para 18). This soft law instrument articulates nine core dimensions of academic freedom: (1) the right to develop knowledge and ideas; (2) protection by international human rights law; (3) institutional autonomy; (4) intramural and extramural expression; (5) access to information; (6) freedoms of movement and association; (7) essential to all education levels; (8) students’ right to academic freedom; and (9) shared responsibility for its respect, protection and promotion; offering a comprehensive framework that can be used to assess to what extent the SEE reality aligns, or fails to, with different interdependent standards.

Problem description

De jure guarantees and de facto challenges

Academic freedom is legally protected across the selected country cases through constitutional guarantees and ministry-level regulations. In **Albania** academic freedom is formally protected through a constitutional and legislative framework that reflects alignment with European higher education standards (European Commission 2025a). Article 57 of the Albanian Constitution guarantees the autonomy of higher education institutions and the freedom of education, establishing academic freedom as a constitutional principle rather than a merely policy-based commitment. Law No 80/2015 operationalises this, explicitly affirming freedom in teaching, research and self-organisation for all institutions. Crucially, it introduces financial autonomy, allowing universities to manage their own resources as a pillar of institutional independence. These reforms align Albania's system with the Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area standards, emphasising academic freedom, quality assurance and institutional accountability (European Commission 2025a).

Conversely, in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, academic freedom relies on statutory regulation and general guarantees of expression rather than explicit constitutional recognition (EPRS 2023). The Framework Law on Higher Education (2007) provides common principles for governance across the country's fragmented structure. Under Article 7, institutions are unrestricted in developing study programmes and academic innovation; the same article also prohibits discrimination based on gender, ethnicity or political opinion, indirectly supporting academic freedom and equal participation.

In parallel, **Kosovo** protects academic freedom through article 47 of its Constitution and the Law on Higher Education, guaranteeing institutional autonomy and freedom in research and teaching. These instruments safeguard the rights of public and private institutions to determine curricula and self-govern without interference (Qorraj, Krasniqi and Jusufi 2022: 1099–1100). By aligning with the Bologna Process and European standards, this framework aims to foster financial autonomy and pluralistic academic discourse (Qorraj, Krasniqi and Jusufi 2022).

Similarly, **Serbia** recognises academic freedom through statutory law and constitutional guarantees of civil liberties. The national Law on Higher Education (2005) codifies autonomy as a core principle (articles 4–6), granting institutions the right to decide on study programmes, governance, staff election and finances in alignment with European norms (European Commission 2025c). Article 5 further affirms freedom in research, teaching methods and study choice. While not a standalone right, academic freedom is derived from the 2006 Constitution which secures university autonomy and unrestricted scientific and artistic creativity (articles 46, 71, 72 and 73). These provisions reflect Serbia's commitment to the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area, emphasising quality assurance and academic mobility (European Commission 2025c).

The Academic Freedom Index (AFI) reports from 2025 and 2026 reveal a concerning downward trajectory across SEE, specifically regarding the gap between formal status and actual performance. While most countries remain in 'Status B', their global percentile rankings indicate significant erosion. **Kosovo and Serbia** exhibit the most acute deterioration. According to the AFI 2025 (covering 2014–2024), Kosovo was positioned in the top 20–30 percent globally. However, the AFI 2026 (covering 2015–2025) shows a sharp decline to the top 40–50 percent. Similarly, Serbia has fallen from the top 30–40 percent (AFI 2025) to the top 40–50 percent in the 2026 update. Serbia now hovers precariously near the 'Status C' threshold, reflecting a period of sustained democratic backsliding and political pressure on academic institutions. **Bosnia and Herzegovina** shows an increase for the 2015–2025 period (AFI 2026) which placed it in the top 30–40 percent (Status B, score 0.8); whereas AFI 2025 covering periods 2014–2024 indicated a drop to the 40–50 percent range. **Albania** has remained stagnant, consistently ranking in the 30–40 percent across both reporting periods (Kinzelbach et al 2025: 10–11; Kinzelbach et al 2026: 12–13).

Despite the formal guarantees, several systemic issues undermine the practical application of academic freedom in the SEE region.

a. Institutional autonomy versus executive oversight

While legal frameworks exist, the transition from formal to substantive autonomy is hindered by centralised state control, a challenge most prominently observed in **Albania**. The practical realisation of academic freedom in the country remains significantly constrained. Governance of higher education is highly centralised, and institutional autonomy is often described as largely formal rather than substantive (Bedini 2025). Extensive regulatory oversight by the Ministry of Education and other state bodies limits universities' capacity for independent decision-making, particularly in areas of governance, funding and strategic planning (Bedini 2025). The 2015 higher education reform introduced new intermediary agencies that formally aim to enhance quality assurance and oversight; however, these bodies are established, regulated and financed by the Council of Ministers, reinforcing executive control rather than institutional independence (Bedini 2025).

b. Political interference and capture of leadership

A common thread across the four countries considered is the systemic encroachment of political interests into university management and staffing. In **Albania**, political influence further undermines academic autonomy, as concerns persist regarding the appointment of academic leaders based on political affiliation rather than merit (Freedom House 2024a). This issue is more reflected in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, where fragmentation enables extensive political interference, with different political actors exerting control over curricula, funding and institutional appointments within their respective jurisdictions. Curricula across all levels of education remain highly politicised, often reinforcing ethnic narratives and segregation, including practices where students from different ethnic groups attend separate classes. Such arrangements directly undermine inclusive education, critical inquiry and the development of pluralistic academic communities (ERA Platform 2025). Similarly in **Kosovo**, political interference remains a persistent concern, particularly in the governance of public universities, where political actors have historically influenced decision-making bodies and senior appointments (Qorraj, Krasniqi and Jusufi 2022). This has resulted, at times, in academic and leadership positions being filled on the basis of political affiliation rather than merit, undermining institutional independence and academic standards (Qorraj, Krasniqi and Jusufi 2022). A particularly sensitive area has been quality assurance and accreditation. Political interference in the Kosovo Accreditation Agency

(KAA) previously led to its temporary suspension from the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), raising serious concerns about the credibility and independence of the accreditation process (EUA 2021). Although the reforms adopted in 2023 aimed to clarify institutional responsibilities and strengthen procedural safeguards, this episode illustrates the continued vulnerability of higher education governance to political pressure (EUA 2021). Meanwhile in **Serbia**, academic freedom has come under increasing pressure in recent years due to intensified political interference and democratic backsliding (FEPS 2024; EUA 2025a). The government has been accused of attempting to install political allies in university leadership positions and of sanctioning academics who openly criticise state policies (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin 2025). These concerns were echoed at the European level, with a European Parliament resolution in late 2025 strongly condemning repression targeting students, academics, and university staff, alongside the presence of police on university campuses and the withdrawal of funding for public universities (EWB 2025).

c. Systematic corruption and clientelism

Political capture is frequently facilitated by deep-seated corruption and a lack of meritocratic transparency, impacting the cited countries. In **Albania**, corruption, nepotism and subjective decision-making practices weaken transparency and accountability across the higher-education system (Freedom House 2024a). In **Kosovo**, corruption further exacerbates the situation, reflecting broader governance problems within its public sector and negatively affecting transparency and accountability in higher education (Qorraj, Krasniqi and Jusufi 2022). **Bosnia and Herzegovina** is also heavily affected by clientelism, and curricula are politicised at all levels of education (Freedom House 2024b). Corruption and favouritism further weaken academic autonomy, as leadership positions and academic appointments in the country are frequently influenced by political affiliation or personal networks rather than merit (Freedom House 2022).

d. Financial dependency and underfunding

Economic constraints serve as a lever for state control in limiting the capacity for independent research in the countries under analysis. In **Albania**, structural underfunding constitutes a major constraint: public expenditure on higher education remains low, at approximately 0.5 percent of GDP in 2024, while investment in research and innovation is particularly limited (Freedom House 2024a). This funding deficit

restricts independent research capacity, deteriorates working conditions and contributes to declining public trust in academic institutions (Freedom House 2024a). Combined with low academic salaries and limited career prospects, these conditions have accelerated brain drain, as students and academic staff increasingly seek opportunities abroad. Similarly, in **Serbia**, financial and administrative pressure has also emerged as a key tool of control (FEPS 2024). In early 2025, Serbian authorities adopted controversial regulations that substantially increased teaching workloads while simultaneously reducing remuneration for research activities, financially destabilising universities and limiting their capacity for international cooperation (EUA 2025). Moreover, in the context of **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the University of Sarajevo Library project is funded by the Saudi Fund for Development and, represents the largest post-war investment in the university's infrastructure (UNSA 2024). While framed as a 'bridge of friendship' to modernise research capabilities, the heavy reliance on non-EU bilateral funding for core academic facilities has raised concerns regarding the potential for external normative influence. Critics and observers suggest that such significant financial dependency on external actors with different democratic standards may create long-term vulnerabilities for institutional autonomy and the independence of academic discourse in the region (Hasanbegovic-Puric 2011).

e. Politicisation of knowledge and curricula

In ethnically and politically divided contexts, curricula often become a site of ideological struggle, allowing nationalist agendas to be institutionalised through one-sided historical and cultural narratives. At the constitutional level, **Bosnia and Herzegovina's** multi-layered constitutional system (comprising state, entity and cantonal constitutions) enshrines general freedoms of expression, thought and association, from which academic freedom is derived. International and European assessments have consistently highlighted that this fragmented governance structure, combined with ethnic power-sharing arrangements, creates uneven implementation and exposes higher education institutions to political and nationalist pressures (Freedom House 2022). As a result, the country's legal framework formally acknowledges elements of academic freedom, but its constitutional ambiguity and institutional fragmentation continue to weaken effective protection in practice. Academic freedom is constrained by systemic challenges rooted in the post-war political fragmentation and ethnically divided governance structure (UNESCO 2010). The higher-education system mirrors these divisions, operating without a cohesive national legal or policy framework,

as competencies are dispersed across state, entity and cantonal levels (Human Rights Centre nd).

f. Shrinking space for democratic pluralism and critical thought

Serbia increasingly exhibits a climate of fear, where direct repression and restricted information silence independent academic voices. Ongoing policy debates on reforms highlight persistent challenges in fully realising in practice freedoms of expression, thought and association in relation to academic freedom (European Commission 2025d). In particular, evidence from international monitors, civil-society investigations and recent developments in Serbia indicates that academic institutions and public-information actors face sustained political pressure, restricted access to information and shrinking space for independent inquiry and media freedom (BIRN 2024; Karaulić 2025; HRW 2015; OHCHR 2025). The broader political climate has further deteriorated following the collapse of a train station canopy in Novi Sad in November 2024, an incident widely attributed to corruption and institutional neglect (Leofreddi 2024; Milićević 2024). This tragedy triggered large-scale, student-led anti-government protests, during which students and academics reportedly faced intimidation, physical attacks, arbitrary arrests and coordinated smear campaigns in pro-government media (OHCHR 2025). Relevant international organisations have expressed concern and urged Serbian authorities to halt repression and restore university autonomy (EUA 2025; OHCHR 2025).

Notably, the situation at the University of Belgrade has escalated into a direct confrontation between state authorities and academic leadership. Following the tragic death of a student in March 2026, police raided the Rectorate, an act condemned by the rector as an abuse of power and an 'attack on the university' designed to silence political dissent (University of Belgrade 2026). As reported by *Balkan Insight* (Baletić 2026), this investigation has been heavily politicised; government officials and pro-government tabloids launched a 'bloody hands' smear campaign against Rector Vladan Đokić and Dean Danijel Sinani to discredit their support for the student-led protest movement. This instrumentalisation of tragedy serves as a pretext for the state to dismantle university autonomy, with the Ministry of Education using allegations of 'negligence' to justify taking direct control over faculty management (Baletić 2026).

A comparative lens

In these four countries, political interference restricts academic freedom through distinct structural mechanisms. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethno-political fragmentation embeds interference into university governance, stifling inquiry via competing national narratives. Serbia exhibits centralised state control, using loyal boards and financial pressure to

curb autonomy. Albania features subtler interference; despite EU-driven reforms, political networks still dominate appointments. In Kosovo, transitional institutions remain fragile due to party-linked patronage and faculty-level influence. Together, these dynamics, ranging from ethnic division to centralisation, shape the form of interference, necessitating targeted policy responses to address these overlapping legal and institutional pressures.

Rationale for action

Developing a rights-based dimension of academic freedom is necessary because existing policy approaches in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia largely treat academic freedom as an administrative or institutional matter rather than recognising it as a legally enforceable right which is linked in particular to freedom of expression, the right to education and the right to science – as safeguarded under the ICCPR and ICESCR – as well as democratic participation. A rights-based approach leads to shift the focus from discretionary protections to binding obligations on the state to respect, protect and fulfil academic freedom in connection to the aforementioned rights, ensuring transparent governance standards, independent oversight and judicial safeguards. This preferable approach also empowers academics and students as rights-holders, rather than passive beneficiaries of institutional autonomy. In post-conflict and politically polarised contexts such as the Western Balkans, embedding academic freedom within a human rights-based approach is particularly significant: it strengthens resilience against partisan capture of universities, protects minority and dissenting perspectives and aligns national higher education systems with international and European human rights standards.

The urgency of a rights-based shift has been highlighted by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, who exhorted states to endorse the aforementioned Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom which ‘provide important clarity regarding the content, scope and status of academic freedom’ (Shaheed 2024: para 21). By taking these Principles seriously, policymakers in SEE should progress to transition from discretionary institutional protections toward stronger safeguards of the entitlements of researchers, educators and students to academic freedom alike.

A challenge remains the lack of explicit international oversight, as academic freedom has not been addressed as a standalone issue within UN human rights reporting on the SEE region. For instance, the Human Rights Committee’s concluding observations on **Serbia** (HRC 2024a: para38) and **Albania** (HRC 2024b: para 37), in relation to freedom of expression, focused almost exclusively on the safety of journalists; on **Bosnia and Herzegovina** the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR 2021: para 48) addressed the right to education mostly through the lens of primary schooling and children’s rights. Furthermore, the last reporting on **Kosovo** (HRC 2006; CESCR 2008) leaves a significant protection vacuum. The lack of monitoring by these treaty bodies on academic freedom in connection to relevant rights enshrined in the ICCPR and ICESCR leaves the regional education sector without direct international scrutiny on such a core aspect.

Significantly, expanding academic freedom is critical for quality education, innovation and democratic governance. According to Altbach (2016), academic freedom is essential for high-quality education because it allows scholars to teach and research without political or institutional pressure, ensuring that students are exposed to diverse, evidence-based perspectives. When inquiry is restricted, universities cannot develop new knowledge or challenge dominant narratives which directly weaken innovation and intellectual growth. Environments with strong protections for academic freedom tend to attract and retain skilled researchers, improving institutional performance and boosting long-term national competitiveness. These academic conditions are also foundational for democratic governance because open debate, critical thinking and independent expertise are necessary for transparent policymaking and public accountability. Countries with limited academic freedom often experience weakened civil society, reduced public trust and less resilience to polarisation

and disinformation. When universities cannot operate autonomously, intellectual independence declines, research stagnates and critical thinking is weakened.

The transition from formal legal guarantees to substantive independence remains the SEE region's core challenge. In **Albania**, centralised reforms have reinforced executive influence through politically controlled intermediary bodies (Bedini 2025), while **Serbia's** *de facto* autonomy remains vulnerable to political capture and democratic backsliding (Tomić and Radeljić 2022). Simultaneously, **Kosovo's** organisational independence is constrained by

centralised appointment procedures that compromise merit-based leadership (Qorraj, Krasniqi and Jusufi 2025), necessitating governance cultures that promote academic self-direction (Tahiraj and Krek 2022) and research-driven promotion criteria (Kerolli 2022). Finally, in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, complex constitutional fragmentation disperses competences across state, entity and cantonal levels (Mulalić and Ridho 2024). This decentralisation facilitates inconsistent autonomy implementation, allowing political influence to dictate curricula and resource allocation (Mulalić and Ridho 2024).

Policy options

Scenario 1: Onion model. The case of Nordic countries

The onion model of academic freedom, first developed by Gergely Kováts and Zoltán Rónay (EPRS 2024: 8), conceptualises academic freedom as a set of layered elements that together determine its real level of protection. At the core of the model lie the essentials: freedom of research, freedom of teaching, freedom of learning, freedom to disseminate knowledge and academic self-governance; their violation constitutes a direct infringement of academic freedom. Surrounding this core are 'supporting conditions' such as institutional autonomy, secure employment conditions and adequate financial resources, which create the environment necessary for the core freedoms to function effectively. The model therefore illustrates that, while academic freedom may formally exist in law, it remains fragile if these outer safeguards are weak or absent.

The Academic Freedom Index (Kinzelbach et al 2026) puts all the Nordic countries within the status group A, fully free. However, although Sweden and Finland are among the top 10 percent nations, Denmark, Norway and Iceland have declined over the past years (Iddeng et al 2024: 14). Nordic academic freedom thrives through legal protections and institutional autonomy, shielding scholars from political pressure. These mutually reinforcing layers make the region a global benchmark (Iddeng et al 2024).

Benefits

- **Holistic protection of academic freedom:** the onion model recognises that academic freedom does not depend solely on legal guarantees but also on supporting conditions such as institutional autonomy, governance structures and stable funding. By addressing these layers together, the model strengthens both formal and practical protections.
- **Improved institutional resilience:** when universities operate with secure employment conditions, transparent governance and adequate resources, they are better able to resist political or external pressure that could undermine research and teaching independence.
- **Clear analytical and policy framework:** the onion model provides policymakers and institutions with a structured way to identify where protections are weak, whether at the legal, institutional or operational level, and design targeted reforms.
- **Enhanced accountability and monitoring:** by distinguishing between core freedoms and enabling conditions, the onion model facilitates more systematic monitoring of academic freedom and helps detect early warning signs of institutional interference.

Positive outcomes

- **Sustained high levels of academic freedom:** Nordic countries consistently rank in the highest category of the Academic Freedom Index, demonstrating that layered legal and institutional protections contribute to a stable and well-protected academic environment.
- **Strong institutional trust and research performance:** universities in the Nordic region benefit from high levels of institutional credibility and an open research environment, enabling scholars to pursue independent inquiry and participate actively in international academic collaboration.

Challenges

- **External factors and implementation gaps:** even when core legal protections exist, weak outer layers, such as insufficient funding or limited institutional autonomy can undermine their practical effectiveness.
- **Political and institutional resistance:** reforms aimed at strengthening governance transparency or reducing political influence may face resistance from actors benefiting from existing power structures.

Assessment

The onion model shows how political influence can affect different layers of the system. In Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia, legal protections for academic freedom often exist at the core level. However, the outer layers, such as institutional autonomy, governance structures, funding systems and accreditation bodies are more vulnerable to political pressure. Political actors can influence universities through appointments, funding decisions or regulatory control. Using the onion model helps identify which institutional layers need strengthening to better protect academic freedom in practice.

Scenario 2: Legislative fortification. The case of Montenegro

Montenegro's academic freedom, noted for significant improvements between 2014 and 2024, notably strengthened by legal reforms like the 2019 Law on Academic Integrity and the 2024 Law on Higher Education (Kinzelbach et al 2025). While neighbouring SEE countries struggle with fragile outer layers, Montenegro's 2019 Law on Academic Integrity and recent Higher Education amendments have

formalised the 'freedom to disseminate knowledge' and 'academic self-governance' into enforceable rights. By establishing a national Ethics Committee and mandating 20 percent student representation in governance, the state has reinforced the protective 'skin' of institutional autonomy (European Commission 2025e). These structural safeguards have transformed academic freedom from a formal legal concept into a resilient practice, making Montenegro the only SEE nation to show a statistically significant decadal improvement.

Benefits

- **Stronger legal protection of academic freedom:** legal reforms such as the 2019 Law on Academic Integrity and the 2024 Law on Higher Education formally codified key academic freedoms, namely freedom to disseminate knowledge and academic self-governance, providing clearer legal guarantees and stronger mechanisms to enforce academic rights.
- **Improved institutional accountability:** a national Ethics Committee strengthens oversight of academic integrity and misconduct, helping to ensure that academic standards and ethical norms are consistently upheld across the higher-education system.
- **More inclusive university governance:** a required students' representation promotes participatory decision-making within universities, contributing to greater transparency and strengthening internal checks.

Positive outcomes

- **Measurable improvement in academic freedom indicators:** Montenegro recorded a statistically significant improvement in academic freedom between 2014 and 2024, making it one of the few countries in SEE to demonstrate measurable progress over the past decade.
- **Transformation of legal guarantees into practical protections:** by combining legal reforms with robust university governance and integrity mechanisms, Montenegro strengthened the institutional environment supporting academic freedom, helping translate legal principles into resilient practices.

Challenges

- **Dependence on sustained political commitment:** legislative protections of academic freedom remain vulnerable to future political shifts, requiring prevention from the weakening or amendment of established frameworks.
- **Institutional capacity and administrative adaptation:** implementing mechanisms like the Ethics Committee and expanding governance participation require different organisational capacity-building across universities.

Assessment

The second model shows how specific laws on academic integrity, governance transparency and academic self-governance can translate abstract principles into enforceable rights. It provides useful lessons especially for Albania and Kosovo. In several SEE countries, academic freedom is recognised in constitutional or higher education legislation but lacks clear enforcement mechanisms and institutional safeguards. By strengthening normative frameworks, establishing oversight bodies, and formalising participatory governance mechanisms, they could reinforce institutional accountability and reduce political interference in universities while gradually strengthening the practical protection of academic freedom.

Scenario 3: Political pluralism. The case of Estonia

Estonia has ranked among the countries with the highest levels of academic freedom in the world and has consistently performed well since 1993, according to the Academic Freedom Index (Kinzelbach et al 2026). This achievement is closely linked to the interaction between strong institutional protections for universities and the development of a pluralist democratic system (Research in Estonia 2025). Estonia's democratic governance is characterised by strong rule of law, freedom of expression, judicial constraints on executive power and transparent elections (Kinzelbach et al 2026). These features allow civil society organisations, political opposition and minority voices to participate openly in public debate. As a result, universities operate within a political culture that values intellectual independence and resists political interference, enabling diverse perspectives and critical thinking to flourish.

Benefits

- **Pluralist democratic governance:** open political competition, transparent elections and active civil society participation foster a political culture that values intellectual independence and limits political interference in universities.
- **Protection of freedom of expression:** broad protections for free speech allow scholars and students to engage in critical debate, research and public discussion without fear of repression.

Positive outcomes

- **Consistently high academic freedom rankings:** Estonia has maintained one of the highest scores globally in the Academic Freedom Index since the early 1990s.
- **Vibrant academic and research environment:** universities benefit from an open intellectual climate that encourages diverse viewpoints and critical scholarship.
- **Strong public trust in higher education institutions:** transparent governance and democratic accountability have helped universities maintain credibility and legitimacy within society.

Challenges

- **Exposure to geopolitical and information pressures:** countries in sensitive geopolitical contexts may face external influence campaigns or political narratives that attempt to shape academic discourse or public debate within universities.

Assessment

The third scenario illustrates how the combination of the rule of law, judicial oversight, freedom of expression and active civil society participation can create a political environment that safeguards intellectual independence. It is particularly relevant for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, but also applicable across the wider region. In several SEE countries, political polarisation, weak institutional checks and executive influence over public institutions create conditions in which universities may become vulnerable to political pressure. Strengthening democratic governance and pluralistic debate in the region could play a key role in reducing political interference and enabling universities to operate as independent spaces of research, teaching and critical inquiry.

Policy recommendations

The following recommendations respond to the challenges that academic freedom faces in the four SEE countries analysed above, placing a human-rights-based approach at their core, towards a proper recognition, protection and implementation of the right to academic freedom.

To national governments:

- Align both national legal protections and higher education reforms with the **state obligations** under the **ICCPR** (Article 19 (freedom of opinion and expression)) and **ICESCR** (Article 13 (right to education), Article 15(1) (right to participate in cultural life and to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications) and Article 15(3) (freedom indispensable for scientific research and creative activity)).
- Legally entrench **substantive institutional autonomy** by codifying transparent, merit-based selection and dismissal procedures for academic leadership to eliminate political interference in appointments, accreditation and funding, a priority for **Albania, Kosovo and Serbia**.
- Depoliticise **quality assurance and accreditation systems** by guaranteeing the independence, professional composition and stable funding of accreditation agencies, ensuring legal safeguards against discretionary dismissals to align with European Standards, particularly in **Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina**.
- Strengthen **system coherence and coordination mechanisms**, particularly in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, by establishing binding minimum national standards for academic freedom, merit-based governance and transparent funding criteria across entities and cantons.
- Reform **funding models** by introducing transparent, competitive and peer-reviewed research schemes with predictable multi-year financing to replace discretionary allocations, preventing financial instruments from becoming indirect tools of political control, especially in **Albania and Serbia**.
- Adopt **national academic freedom action plans** grounded in a human-rights based approach, with measurable benchmarks, reporting obligations and periodic parliamentary review.

To universities:

- Institutionalise **transparent, merit-based internal selection procedures** for rectors, deans and faculty senates. Universities should adopt internal regulation that mandates open competitions with clearly defined academic criteria and include independent observers in selection committees to prevent political ‘capture’ of leadership positions.
- Adopt **internal ‘Academic Freedom Charters’** that explicitly protect staff and students from administrative or disciplinary reprisals for critical research, public expression or anti-government activism. These charters should include clear whistleblower protections and be integrated into the university’s foundational statutes.
- Establish **independent University Ombudsperson Offices** tasked specifically with monitoring academic integrity and investigating claims of political interference or nepotism. These offices must have the mandate to publish annual transparency reports on governance and funding, providing a layer of internal accountability.
- Embed **European standards for research and promotion** into internal career-advancement frameworks. By shifting from seniority-based or subjective promotion to competitive, peer-reviewed, and research-led criteria aligned with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) norms, universities can reduce the influence of clientelism.

To civil society organisations:

- Establish **independent academic freedom monitoring initiatives** by civil society to document political interference and verify the integrity of leadership appointments; these groups should produce shadow reports on threats to academic freedom and ethical misconduct to reinforce accountability across the region.
- Strengthen **coalitions between student unions, academic associations and human-rights organisations** to advocate collectively for transparent governance, merit-based appointments and accountability in university leadership. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, cross-entity academic alliances are essential to overcome fragmentation and ethnic politicisation.

- Promote **legal literacy and awareness of academic freedom standards**, including training programmes for academic staff and students on institutional autonomy, whistleblower protections and reporting mechanisms.
- Engage **strategically with media and investigative journalists** to expose patterns of clientelism or corruption in higher education, particularly in **Kosovo** and **Albania**, where governance opacity remains a concern.

To regional actors, donors and partners (eg, EU and Council of Europe (CoE)):

- Systematically monitor **academic freedom within enlargement and rule-of-law frameworks**, incorporating specific indicators on university autonomy, governance transparency and protection from political interference into annual country reports. Monitoring should be structured, comparable and publicly accessible.
- Condition aspects of **pre-accession funding and education cooperation programmes** on measurable improvements in institutional autonomy and accreditation independence, particularly in **Serbia** and **Albania**.
- Support **regional peer-review and benchmarking mechanisms** aligned with the EHEA standards, enabling universities, particularly in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** and **Kosovo**, to strengthen governance practices through structured external evaluation.
- Facilitate **regional academic dialogue platforms** that promote cross-border cooperation and reduce politicised isolation of universities in fragmented systems, such as **Bosnia and Herzegovina**.
- Increase **direct, competitive research funding mechanisms** accessible to universities and academic consortia independently of national political structures. Multi-year grant schemes and international peer review can reduce dependency on politicised domestic funding streams.
- Invest in **governance-capacity programmes** that train university leadership, senates and administrative staff in transparent management,

accountability and rights-based institutional governance.

- Provide **targeted support for at-risk scholars and students**, including emergency fellowships, mobility schemes and institutional partnerships, particularly in contexts of political pressure such as **Serbia**.

To UN treaty bodies:

- The Human Rights Committee should explicitly address academic freedom in its concluding observations for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia. It should particularly integrate its analysis under the **freedoms of opinion and expression** (Article 19 of the ICCPR), focusing on scholars and students' protection from state-led retaliation, smear campaigns and administrative pressure.
- The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights should specifically address academic freedom within its reviews of the implementation of the **right to education** (Article 13 of the ICESCR) and **the right to access to, participate in and enjoy science** (Article 15 of the ICESCR) by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia. It should particularly evaluate the *de facto* independence of institutional governance and accreditation processes to ensure that political interference does not compromise the substantive autonomy.

Conclusion

Despite geographical proximity, academic freedom in the four countries analysed follows worrying trajectories: **Albania** faces executive regulatory control; **Bosnia and Herzegovina** struggles with constitutional fragmentation; **Kosovo** deals with governance and accreditation instability; and **Serbia** experiences democratic backsliding and political pressure. Yet, all share a common gap between formal law and practical implementation. Progress in the protection of rights-based dimensions of academic freedom requires coordinated action and full compliance with international human rights law. National governments must legally entrench institutional autonomy through merit-based

leadership selection, depoliticise accreditation agencies and adopt national action plans with transparent research funding; universities should institutionalise Academic Freedom Charters, establish independent Ombudsperson offices and embed EHEA-aligned peer-reviewed promotion criteria; civil society must monitor and advocate for accountability; regional actors such as the CoE and the EU should leverage conditionality; and donors must provide independent funding. Collectively, these actors can establish academic freedom as a pillar of democratic stability and institutional credibility.

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The Global Campus of Human Rights

The Global Campus of Human Rights is a unique network of more than one hundred participating universities around the world, seeking to advance human rights and democracy through regional and global cooperation for education and research. This global network is promoted through eight Regional Programmes which are based in Venice (GC Europe), Sarajevo/Bologna (GC South East Europe), Pretoria (GC Africa), Bangkok (GC Asia-Pacific), Yerevan (GC Caucasus), Buenos Aires (GC Latin America and the Caribbean), Beirut (GC Arab World), and Bishkek (GC Central Asia).

The Global Campus Policy Observatory

The policy observatory aims to enhance the role of the Global Campus and its regional members in undertaking coordinated research initiatives and providing guidance and expert opinions in response to urgent human rights issues to a broad primary and secondary audience. It provides a virtual hub with the participation of a team of researchers who are alumni from GC regional programmes, for the production of a set of complementary policy analyses on selected topics.

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