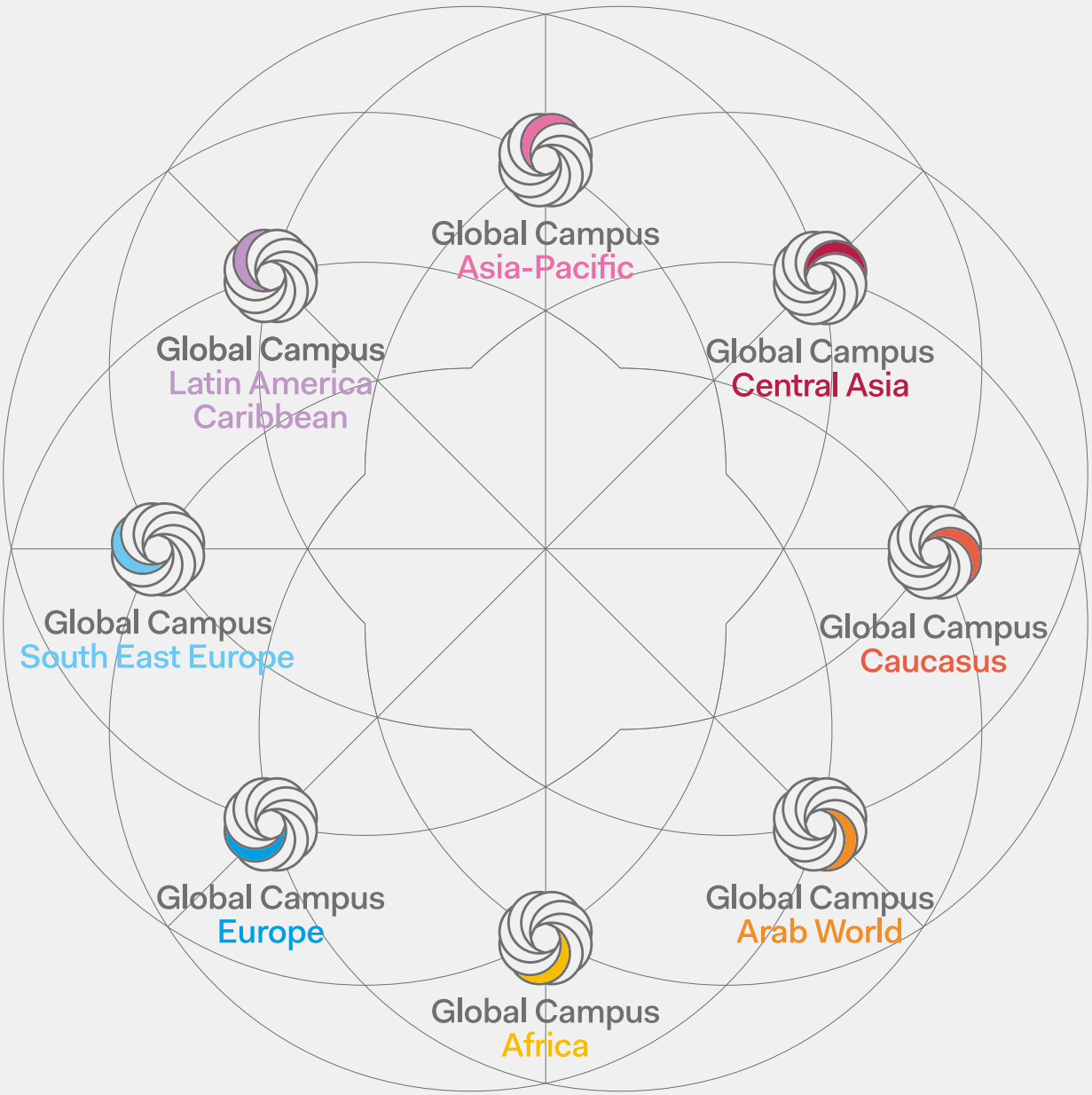
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Akylai Tenizbaeva

Upholding the right to academic freedom in Central Asia: Policy directions for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

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Upholding the right to academic freedom in Central Asia: Policy directions for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

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Akylai Tenizbaeva [1]

Executive summary

Academic freedom in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan remains structurally constrained despite higher education reforms and stated ambitions to build knowledge-based economies. Universities across the region continue to operate with limited institutional autonomy, formally established but inconsistently applied legal protections and informal mechanisms of control that foster self-censorship among scholars. Politically sensitive fields – particularly in the social sciences and humanities – are subject to monitoring, exclusion from curricula or indirect pressure through funding, publishing and personnel decisions. High-profile cases of academic repression illustrate how routine scholarly activity can be reframed as a security or loyalty issue, generating a chilling effect that extends well beyond individual incidents.

This policy brief argues that safeguarding academic freedom is a legal obligation grounded in international human rights law and a practical prerequisite for innovation, effective governance and sustainable development. Empirical research demonstrates a strong correlation between academic freedom and innovation outputs, while comparative evidence shows that tightly controlled academic systems undermine policy capacity and international credibility.

The brief evaluates policy trajectories and finds that relying solely on piecemeal reforms is insufficient. Incremental changes have produced limited openings but remain fragile, reversible and unevenly implemented. The analysis advances a set of evidence-based recommendations aimed at ensuring the effective implementation and protection of academic freedom in law and practice, strengthening institutional autonomy, limiting security-sector involvement to clearly defined thresholds, protecting academic expression and ensuring public accountability. Implemented collectively, these measures can help Central Asian states reconcile stability concerns with the need for independent knowledge production, enabling universities to contribute meaningfully to national development and societal resilience.

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Introduction

Universities are meant to be spaces where ideas can thrive and where questioning, debating and discovering are actively encouraged and protected. In Central Asia, however, this ideal remains difficult to realise. Scholars in **Kazakhstan**, **Kyrgyzstan** and **Uzbekistan** often navigate environments where curiosity can collide with political sensitivities, and the boundaries of permissible inquiry are shaped more by caution and implicit limits than by clear legal guarantees. Independent thinking has been discouraged by hierarchical governance practices (Oleksiyenko 2020), and bureaucratic supervision of academia remains customary in the region. As a result, the conceptualisation of academic freedom is not yet deeply rooted in the institutional culture in these countries. Many academics feel pressure to avoid research topics that might be deemed sensitive, and open criticism of official narratives is rare. From a human rights perspective, this is more than an education policy concern.

Academic freedom is grounded in international human rights law, notably in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which protect freedom of expression, right to education, right to science and other relevant rights (Kaye 2020: para 5; Shaheed 2024: paras 9–10). In essence, scholars should be free to pursue knowledge and express ideas, inside and outside the classroom, without fear of punishment. When these rights are curtailed, universities cannot fulfil their role as engines of innovation and critical thought, and societies lose an informed, independent voice in public discourse. The stakes are high.

Academic freedom is not just an abstract principle but a driver of tangible benefits. In a global study of 157 countries, increases in academic freedom were correlated with significantly higher innovation outputs (Audretsch et al 2024). Free academic inquiry allows new ideas to emerge and challenges outdated policies with evidence-based solutions, contributing to social and economic progress. Conversely, an atmosphere of fear and control in academia stifles creativity and problem-solving, leading to stagnation. Moreover, academic freedom has spillover effects on democratic governance and civic life: universities that encourage open debate help nurture an informed citizenry and a culture of constructive criticism. In Central Asia, where development goals include diversifying economies and improving governance, empowering the academic sector is locally relevant. As this brief will argue, protecting academic freedom is not a foreign-imposed notion but a necessary step toward each country's stated ambitions of becoming knowledge-based societies.

This policy brief examines the structural constraints on academic freedom in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, with a particular focus on the gap between formal legal guarantees and their practical implementation. Undertaking a human rights-based approach to this inquiry, it takes into account recent international elaborations in the field and proposes policy pathways to strengthen both legal enforcement and institutional autonomy.

Problem description

Academic freedom in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan is constrained by a combination of legal, political and institutional pressures. While each country's context is unique, a common pattern is evident: universities operate under strong state influence and enjoy only limited independence in deciding what can be taught, researched and discussed.

In practice, higher education governance often remains closely intertwined with **broader state oversight structures**, and in some cases with **security-sector influence**. This oversight frequently crosses the line into overt interference. Certain subjects are effectively off-limits or heavily monitored, especially in the social sciences and humanities. For example, entire disciplines that are seen as politically sensitive have been targeted. In **Uzbekistan**, the government

went so far as to abolish the teaching of political science in 2015, dismissing it as a 'Western' pseudo-science incompatible with the Uzbek development model (Najibullah 2015). Political science textbooks were ordered to be removed from universities and the words 'Political Science' were excised from course titles (Najibullah 2015). Although this ban was partially lifted in 2019, with political science reintroduced only at a single university as a controlled experiment (Reuters 2019), the episode illustrates how policy decisions can erase entire fields of study.

More routinely, **politically sensitive areas** such as history, politics and religion are avoided or filtered out of curricula across Central Asia. Local scholars have adapted to these realities by exercising **self-censorship** as a survival strategy. Researchers often steer clear of inquiries that might provoke official displeasure, or they water down and sanitise their findings. As documented by one researcher, academics face state-led threats of suppression and silencing, including even efforts to co-opt them into spreading government propaganda (Norov 2024). The ever-present possibility of surveillance or denunciation leads many to 'play it safe', preferring conformity over originality. This climate was powerfully described in Ruslan Norov's account of academic repression: he recounts being openly accused of espionage by his institute's director and pressured to act as an informant for the secret police – merely because he collaborated with foreign colleagues and encouraged critical thinking among his students (Norov 2024). Such incidents send a chilling message. Scholars who refuse to toe the line may face harassment, blacklisting or worse. Norov notes that by the mid-2010s, security services had branded him and others who questioned official narratives as 'enemies of the people' and 'traitors', forcing him to flee his home country. His story is not an isolated one.

There have been several high-profile cases in recent years underscoring the risks Central Asian academics face. In **Kyrgyzstan** – a country long viewed as relatively democratic by regional standards – a **wave of repression** hit the academic community in April 2021. Political scientist Marat Kazakpayev was arrested on vague charges of high treason, with authorities releasing no detailed evidence of his wrongdoing (CESS 2021). He died in pre-trial detention 14 months later amid allegations of inadequate medical care (Imanaliyeva 2022). Another Kyrgyzstani scholar, PhD candidate Gulzat Alieva, was detained in 2021 for 'inciting religious discord' after she made a social media post about *Tengrism* (a Central Asian indigenous belief). Although Alieva was eventually acquitted in late 2022, the prosecution itself sent a warning signal to other researchers (Dzhumashova 2021). These cases exemplify how easily normal academic activities can be reframed as crimes against the state.

Beyond overt crackdowns, **vague regulations** exacerbate the insecurity of educators and students, particularly when definitions of acceptable speech or research tend to be broad and malleable. This vagueness allows authorities to brand critical or inconvenient scholarship as 'anti-state' or 'extremist' at their discretion. For instance, in **Kyrgyzstan** the Constitution does not refer explicitly to academic freedom, while article 21 (introduced in 2021) emphasises the protection of cultural values, traditions and moral foundations of society. While this provision is formally framed as compatible with human rights, its broad and open-ended nature creates space for interpretation; in practice, this ambiguity can be used to challenge or discourage academic work that is perceived as contradicting 'national values', especially in sensitive areas such as gender, religion or historical interpretation. Nevertheless, the Law About Education 179/2023 defines academic freedom as 'the right to development of training programs, independent statement of subject matter, the choice of subject for scientific research and methods of their carrying out, and also the right of students to knowledge acquisition according to the capabilities'. Looking at **Kazakhstan**, there is not a specific legal guarantee protecting academics and students from sanctions for controversial views; actually, article 174 of the Criminal Code broadly refers to 'inciting social discord', which international observers warn can be used against any critics of the government (HRW 2024). Nonetheless, in the Constitution, article 20 grants 'freedom of expression and creativity', also prohibiting censorship and recognising the 'right to receive and disseminate information'; while article 30 protects the right to education without referring to academic freedom. In 2018, the Law 171-VI ZRK expanded academic and managerial independence of higher education institutions. Instead, in **Uzbekistan**, article 51 of the Constitution establishes higher educational institutions' 'right to academic freedom, self-government, freedom of research and teaching in accordance with the law'; the 2020 Law on Education protects everyone's right to education without referring to academic freedom.

Repression is only one tool in what has been called an 'authoritarian survival toolkit' affecting academia. Studies in Central Asia find that governments also use **co-optation and rewards** to align scholars with state narratives. Universities and academics may receive generous funding or promotions if their work bolsters official policies or international image-making. For

example, in Kazakhstan, state-led research grants often prioritise projects that celebrate national achievements or echo government programmes, while more critical social research struggles to find support (Knox, Kurmanov and Yesdauletov 2025). This dynamic creates an implicit bargain where academia is not primarily a space for independent inquiry, but rather an instrument to legitimise the regime and project a semblance of scholarly credibility on the world stage. In other words, scholars are sometimes enlisted to produce knowledge that flatters the state or justifies its policies, blurring the line between education and propaganda. Such co-optation can be subtle (eg, inviting academics to closed-door 'consultations' on policy in exchange for public silence on contentious issues) or explicit (eg, pressures to sign letters endorsing government positions). In **Uzbekistan**, this control is further institutionalised through regulatory mechanisms governing foreign funding: non-governmental organisations and academic institutions receiving foreign grants are required to coordinate them and related activities with the Ministry of Justice, which may involve the Ministry of Foreign Affairs review. In practice, this extends state oversight to the implementation of externally funded academic projects, including conferences, research initiatives and training events, effectively limiting the scope of independent international collaboration (Uzbek Forum 2022). As result, even academics who do not face direct persecution may still feel constrained to support the status quo. The loss of these voices represents a brain drain that harms not only academia but the broader development of each nation. With universities under strain and talent fleeing, the need to address this problem grows more urgent by the day.

Another problematic aspect is that **only limited reforms** have been introduced in two of the three countries under analysis, with the aim of easing the most egregious constraints on academic activity. In particular, **incremental changes** such as granting select universities a bit more autonomy, encouraging international partnerships or slightly relaxing censorship on less sensitive topics, have been stopping short of systemic legal reform. For instance, **Kazakhstan** joined the European Bologna Process over a decade ago and, in 2018, amended its Law on Education to give universities greater academic and managerial autonomy (European Commission 2024). These measures allow Kazakhstani universities to design their curricula and set certain policies independently from the Ministry of Education (Hartley et al 2016). Additionally, Kazakhstan has been setting up governing boards at universities and moving toward outcome-based funding, which in theory, reduces direct bureaucratic control.

These shifts have created modest openings: higher education institutions have more latitude in introducing new courses or research programmes than in the early 2000s, with a proliferation of foreign partnerships and joint degree programmes. **Uzbekistan**, after 2016, provides another example: President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's liberalisation agenda and reforms increased the number of universities (including inviting reputable foreign universities to open branches in Tashkent and other cities) and lifting bans on Western academic materials. Uzbek scholars can attend international conferences more freely, and the government touts academic exchange as part of its development strategy (Celeti, Nurmanova and Gavalyan 2019).

Recent research suggests that **partial changes on security services' role** in higher education feature **Uzbekistan**'s academic environment. One professor at a state-owned university observed that, whereas security agencies previously exercised strict control over academic life, they now largely refrain from intervening in internal scholarly processes, noting that 'interfering in our internal thinking is not included in the list of their tasks' (Knox, Kurmanov and Yesdauletov 2025: 8). However, the withdrawal of direct security surveillance has not translated into full academic autonomy. Instead, **new forms of internal control** have emerged at the departmental level. Interviewees reported pervasive gatekeeping practices, especially in relation to topics framed as ideologically sensitive. One academic described a fixed state-approved interpretive line, explaining that deviation from it would require forced revision of one's work, as 'if you bring something that contradicts it, you will be forced to correct it' (Knox, Kurmanov and Yesdauletov 2025: 8). Another respondent linked these pressures to official narratives surrounding the so-called 'Third Renaissance', arguing that academics are encouraged to revive concepts lacking clear intellectual foundations, driven more by political messaging than scholarly debate (Knox, Kurmanov and Yesdauletov 2025).

In contrast, interview evidence suggests security agencies' more limited role in shaping academic life in **Kazakhstan**. None of the interviewed academics reported direct involvement of security services in their research activities. One respondent noted that surveillance is largely confined to senior university management, explaining that rectors, deans and their deputies are required to report foreign travel, while ordinary faculty members enjoy comparatively greater freedom (Knox, Kurmanov and Yesdauletov 2025: 8). At the departmental level, interviewees reported little to no monitoring of research content, with one professor remarking that colleagues 'never

really read each other's work' (Knox, Kurmanov and Yesdauletov 2025: 8). Similarly, academics did not perceive formal restrictions on publishing in foreign journals, although some uncertainty remains regarding potential repercussions should critical research attract the attention of state bodies. As one respondent observed, while access to international publications is largely unrestricted, it is unclear how such work might 'backfire' if it reaches government authorities, though they did not anticipate severe repression (Knox, Kurmanov and Yesdauletov 2025: 8). Rather than direct state intervention, the **monitoring and censorship** of academic output in Kazakhstan appears to be delegated to **local publishers**, who act as gatekeepers responsible for filtering content that may cross unwritten constraints. Interviewees suggested that journals and their editorial boards may face warnings or sanctions if controversial material is published, placing responsibility on editors rather than individual authors (Knox, Kurmanov and Yesdauletov 2025: 8). Additionally, the Ministry of Higher Education reportedly exercises oversight over research conducted under large state grants. One case was cited in which a scholar was reprimanded for publishing a critical article on interreligious relations produced within the framework of a state-funded project (Knox, Kurmanov and Yesdauletov 2025: 8).

Overall, the gradual changes in various aspects of higher education in **Kazakhstan** and **Uzbekistan** have improved opportunities for collaboration and brought in fresh resources and ideas from abroad. They illustrate the potential of low-risk, step-by-step change. However, they often come framed as modernising the education system or meeting international best practices rather than as human rights reforms, which can make them more palatable domestically. Furthermore, the gradual reform model has itself become a defining feature of the current governance approach to higher education. Rather than resolving structural constraints, it manages and contains them, allowing limited openings while preserving core mechanisms of state oversight. Such an 'incremental' approach can yield real benefits: students might gain exposure to new perspectives, some faculty enjoy a bit more academic liberty in less politically sensitive fields (like business administration or STEM subjects), and overall quality can inch upward. However, the **limitations of this approach** are equally evident. Crucially, these reforms do not yet embed academic freedom as a fully protected legal entitlement. They tend to rely on the goodwill of current leaders and can be easily reversed or undermined by informal pressures. For example, while **Kazakhstan**'s universities now have greater formal autonomy, leadership selection remains closely tied to the state: rectors of many public universities continue to be appointed through government-controlled procedures (OECD 2017). Similarly, **Uzbekistan**'s political opening has clear limits: sensitive topics such as the legacy of the Karimov era remain politically delicate, and international branch campuses operate under agreements requiring compliance with local laws and regulations governing speech. Thus, the culture of self-censorship may persist even if formal rules are relaxed. From a human rights perspective, such a 'piecemeal' approach falls short of meeting states' obligations under international law. Significantly, the Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom also stress that related rights must be protected *de jure* (in law) and *de facto* (in reality) (WGAF 2024: principle 2).

Moreover, these incremental reforms remain fragile not because academic freedom is absent or insufficiently defined under national legal frameworks, but because existing national **provisions are not effectively implemented or institutionally safeguarded**. Even where legal guarantees exist, they do not consistently function as enforceable rights in practice. This is reflected in weak judicial enforcement, limited access to independent remedies and the selective application of broadly framed legal provisions, which allows authorities to restrict academic activity without clear justification or effective oversight.

A change in political circumstances – such as a national security crisis or leadership shift – can therefore quickly undermine these limited gains. Crucially, these reforms do not address the core issue: the **absence of accountability for violations**. When academics face harassment by security services or dismissal due to their research, there are still no independent and reliable mechanisms for redress, such as specialised ombudspersons or established judicial practice. In this sense, gradual reforms function less as a transition toward substantive academic freedom and more as a form of controlled liberalisation that preserves existing power hierarchies.

In short, gradual reforms may be preferable to open repression but remain insufficient. They yield only marginal improvements in academic freedom indicators (Kinzelbach et al 2026): **Uzbekistan**, for instance, is identified as a case of statistically significant improvement in the AFI; however, this progress starts from a very low baseline and does not fundamentally alter its position in the lower global range; **Kazakhstan**, while scoring somewhat higher, in the bottom 30–40 percent, has likewise experienced stagnation rather than substantial progress; while **Kyrgyzstan** is indicated as a statistically significant declining case of academic freedom over the past ten years. Without deeper structural changes, the mentioned reforms risk creating a veneer of progress while leaving fundamental constraints in place.

Rationale for action

Strengthening academic freedom in Central Asia higher education systems is about fulfilling core state obligations under international human rights law and unlocking concrete benefits for universities, professors, students and society. All three countries are parties to the ICCPR and the ICESCR, which, read together, enshrine relevant entitlements that implicitly and explicitly require respect and protection for academic freedom.

In particular, Article 18 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion) and Article 19 (freedom of expression) of the ICCPR entail the right to have and manifest a belief or religion without coercion and the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas without interference. As stressed by a UN Special Rapporteur, academic freedom is closely bound up with these guarantees: restrictions on academic freedom limit the production and sharing of knowledge and therefore undermine a core component of freedom of expression (Kaye 2020: para 54). He further underlined that academic freedom protects not only teaching and publication, but also research, discussion, methodological inquiry and academics' participation in public debate, while requiring an enabling institutional environment free from political interference. Moreover, the ICESCR reinforces these protections, especially under Article 13 (right to education) and Article 15 (right to access and participate in cultural life, enjoy the scientific progress benefits and benefit from the protection of moral and material interests resulting from scientific, literary or artistic production), also requiring states to respect 'the freedom indispensable for scientific research and creative activity'. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) clarified that academic freedom is an essential aspect of the right to education, stating that 'the enjoyment of academic freedom requires the autonomy of institutions of higher education' (CESCR 1999: para 39). It also emphasised that states parties must respect and protect academic and scientific freedom as a core component of the right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress (CESCR 2020: para 46). Therefore, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have binding obligations to align domestic policies with these international norms. Failures to do so undermine their international credibility and deny their citizens the full and effective enjoyment of rights that these states have pledged to uphold.

While the Human Rights Committee (HRC) and the CESCR's concluding observations on the three countries did not consistently address academic freedom as a standalone issue, some of their concerns about the aforementioned rights are relevant to the legal and institutional conditions under which academic freedom can be exercised in practice. Regarding **Kazakhstan**, HRC (2025: paras 49–50) expressed concern 'that independent outlets face surveillance, harassment and shutdowns' and 'that online expression is systematically restricted, especially during elections and protests', recommending measures to ensure that everyone can freely exercise the right to freedom of expression under Article 19 and General Comment No 34. CESCR (2019: paras 48–49) recommended to end corruption in educational institutions, improve quality education, ensure students' access to education in their ethnic minority languages; regarding 'the reported corruption and lack of transparency in resource allocation for scientific research, and their impact on the right to participate in scientific activities', it recommended 'increased transparent budget allocation' and to promote the development and dissemination of science and culture (paras 50–51). Regarding **Kyrgyzstan**, HRC (2022: paras 45–46) expressed concern about 'undue government pressure' on individuals for expressing their opinions that are critical of its initiatives, recommending refraining from the use of criminal prosecution as a tool to suppress critical reporting on matters of public interest. CESCR only addressed children's access to education and the availability of education

in all national minority language (CESCR 2024: paras 60–63). Regarding **Uzbekistan**, HRC (2020: paras 44–45) expressed concerned that 'legislation regulating mass communication, information technologies and the use of the Internet unduly restricts freedom of expression', and 'about the ongoing imprisonment of individuals on extremism-related and other politically motivated charges, including independent journalists, human rights defenders and bloggers, for the peaceful expression of critical views'; it recommended that any restrictions comply with the strict requirements of Article 19(3) as well as the effective protection of government critics and dissidents and other activists 'against any action that may constitute harassment, persecution or undue interference in the exercise of their professional activities or of their right to freedom of opinion and expression', also ensuring 'that such acts are thoroughly and independently investigated, prosecuted and sanctioned and that victims are provided with effective remedies'. CESCR recommended strengthening the quality of education, improving the educational infrastructure to ensure the accessibility of persons with disabilities to schools and universities and to achieve inclusive education (CESCR 2022: paras 54–55).

Additionally, UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel provides a detailed roadmap for governments to safeguard academic freedom (1997: paras 26–27). It calls on states to ensure that higher-education personnel enjoy academic freedom, including the freedom to teach, discuss and conduct research without institutional censorship. It emphasises institutional self-governance and the participation of academic staff in decision-making bodies (paras 31–32), as well as employment security and safeguards such as tenure to protect academic independence (paras 45–46).

These international standards are reinforced by the Principles for Implementing the Right to 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). They clarify the content, scope and status of academic freedom (Shaheed 2024: para 21), articulating nine core aspects to consider: (1) the right to develop knowledge and ideas; (2) protection under international human rights law; (3) institutional autonomy; (4) intramural and extramural expression; (5) access to information; (6) freedoms of movement and association; (7) essentiality to all education levels; (8) students' right to academic freedom; and (9) shared responsibility for its respect, protection and promotion.

Looking at the Academic Freedom Index (AFI), it is worth highlighting that it assesses five core dimensions: 'freedom to research and teach', 'freedom of academic exchange and dissemination', 'institutional autonomy', 'campus integrity' and 'freedom of academic and cultural expression' (Kinzelbach et al 2025). The index ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating stronger protections. Notably, a comparison with the Deliberative Democracy Index (as developed by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute), which captures the extent to which political decision-making is based on reasoned and inclusive public dialogue, suggests a positive, albeit imperfect, correlation between the two. Across Central Asia, similar patterns are observable: **Kyrgyzstan**, while historically performing better, has experienced recent declines in both academic freedom and deliberative democracy, whereas **Uzbekistan** shows modest improvements from a low baseline, and **Kazakhstan** remains relatively stable at constrained levels. While differences remain modest, the consistency in both trends and relative positioning indicates a likely association between **academic freedom and deliberative democratic quality**, even at relatively low levels of democratic development.

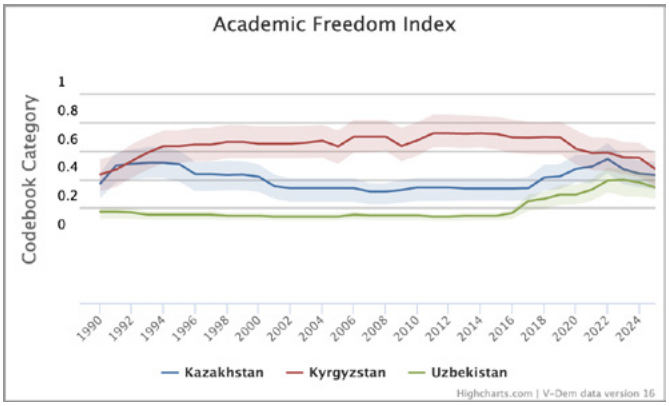


Figure 1. Academic Freedom Index in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, V-dem, 2025

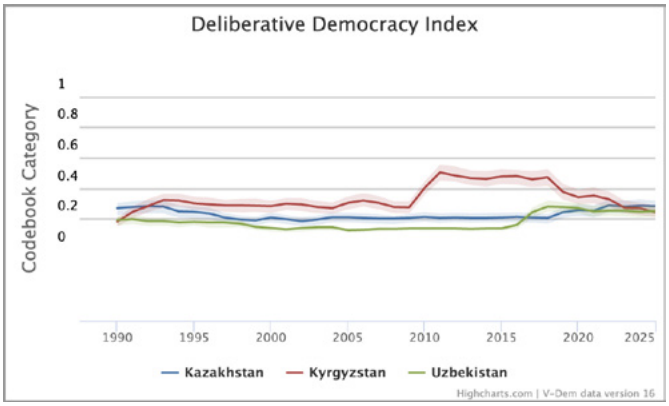


Figure 2. Deliberative Democracy Index in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, V-dem 2025

Beyond international law obligations and soft law commitments related to human rights, there is a **developmental and strategic rationale** for bolstering academic freedom. A vibrant, open academic sector contributes directly to national progress. When scholars are free to conduct research and share ideas, they can help devise solutions to social and economic challenges, whether it be public health strategies, technological innovations or evidence-based policy in agriculture and industry. As noted, empirical studies have found a correlation between academic freedom and innovation: countries where universities operate without fear tend to generate more patents and research breakthroughs (Audretsch et al 2024). This is highly relevant for Central Asian states seeking to diversify their economies and move up the value chain. For example, **Kazakhstan** has ambitions to become a regional science and education hub; achieving this will be difficult if researchers feel constrained and unable to engage in international scientific debates or challenge prevailing wisdom. Conversely, creating a more open academic climate could spur home-grown innovation in energy, mining, agriculture and IT sectors that Central Asian governments prioritise for growth.

Furthermore, academic freedom can help improve **governance and policymaking** by enabling critical analysis of public policies and honest discussion of historical and social issues. In the absence of independent scholarly input, governments risk making decisions based on incomplete or biased information. An academic environment where experts can speak freely allows for candid evaluation of reforms and fosters a pipeline of educated public servants and analysts. This can support state stability and resilience in the long run. As one study of Central Asian higher education concludes, regimes often try to balance repression with *legitimation* – allowing just enough academic activity to bolster their international image and policy capacity (Gerschewski 2013). However, the same study shows that, if regimes lean too heavily on control, they stifle the very expertise and creativity they need. Thus, from a pragmatic standpoint, there is a state interest in finding a better balance that protects core state security concerns while permitting scholarly exploration and critique (Gerschewski 2013).

There are also regional examples showing that change is possible. In particular, **Kyrgyzstan**, despite recent backsliding, historically scored higher on academic freedom indices than its neighbours, reflecting periods of greater pluralism and university autonomy. That relative openness corresponded with Bishkek becoming a hub for independent research non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and lively intellectual debates in the 1990s and 2000s. While Kyrgyzstan's academic freedom has declined lately, its experience demonstrates that Central Asian societies are not inherently 'inimical' to academic freedom – when political conditions allow, scholars and students readily embrace their freedom to debate and critique (Celeti, Nurmanova and Gavalyan 2019).

Policy options

Given the constraints existing on academic freedom in the three countries under analysis, the question is not whether reform is needed, but what pathways are most feasible. Two evidence-based scenarios are elaborated to strengthen legal enforcement and institutional autonomy.

Scenario 1: Legal enforcement model

While academic freedom is recognised in the national legal frameworks of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, these guarantees remain weakly enforced in practice. Notably, such enforceability can regard judicial decisions, institutional policy enforcement and legal rules that safeguard professors and students from political, administrative and societal interference in their teaching, research and speech.

An example of strong legal enforcement is provided by Germany, where article 5(3) of the Basic Law guarantees that 'art and science, research and teaching shall be free'. The Federal Higher Education Framework Act (Hochschulrahmengesetz) further explains the freedom of teaching. The German Federal Constitutional Court has clarified that academic freedom constitutes a fundamental right guaranteeing scholars an autonomous sphere of intellectual activity, protecting 'processes, practices and decisions' related to the production and dissemination of knowledge and safeguarding them against state encroachment. As a defensive right, it ensures that academic work remains free from external direction, with university lecturers retaining responsibility for their subject in both research and teaching (Bundesverfassungsgericht 2008: paras 40–41).

Another relevant example of judicial enforcement is provided by the European Court of Human Rights, which has recognised academic freedom as an integral component of freedom of expression under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (Kaye 2020: para 21). In *Sorguç v Turkey* (2009), the Court held that disciplinary sanctions imposed on a university lecturer for his protests against the promotion system in universities violated Article 10 ECHR, emphasising that academic freedom includes the right to express critical views within one's field of expertise. Importantly, the Court stressed that academic discourse merits a high level of protection, particularly where it contributes to public debate and the advancement of knowledge. As such, any restrictions on academic expression must be subject to scrutiny, requiring strong justification and compliance with the principles of necessity and proportionality (ECtHR 2009: para 35).

Key principles of effective legal enforcement

- **Justiciability:** academic freedom must be enforceable through courts
- **Judicial interpretation:** courts must actively define the scope of protection
- **Proportionality:** restrictions must meet strict human rights standards
- **Effective remedies:** individuals must have access to redress in cases of violations

Building on these principles, Central Asian states can strengthen academic freedom not only by adopting new legal provisions or amending those in force, but also by ensuring that existing guarantees (1) can be invoked before national courts, (2) are interpreted in line with international human rights law and (3) provide effective remedies in cases of violations.

Scenario 2: University governance reform model

In contexts where academic freedom is constrained primarily by informal political influence rather than formal legal prohibitions, governance reforms at the university level can provide an effective pathway for strengthening academic independence.

A well-documented example is Finland, where universities are established as independent legal entities, either public corporations or foundations, under the Finnish Universities Act (2009). This framework separates them from direct state administration and assigns responsibility for internal governance, management structures and financial operations to the institutions themselves. While academic freedom is constitutionally protected, its practical effectiveness is reinforced through these governance arrangements, which limit direct political interference, with the state exercising influence primarily through funding mechanisms and strategic oversight rather than day-to-day control (Finnish Universities Act 2009; OECD 2023).

More broadly, OECD and European University Association studies show that systems with (1) independent governing boards, (2) transparent rector selection and (3) decentralised academic decision-making, tend to exhibit higher levels of institutional autonomy and academic freedom (Pruvot, Estermann and Popkhadze 2023; OECD 2023).

Key principles of university governance-based protection

- **Institutional autonomy:** universities control academic and internal decisions
- **Depoliticised leadership selection:** merit-based appointments reduce political influence
- **Procedural transparency:** clear rules for funding, hiring and curriculum
- **Internal accountability:** institutional review and complaint mechanisms

In Central Asia countries, where informal mechanisms of control are prevalent, university governance reform offers a feasible pathway by (1) reducing discretionary political influence over universities, (2) strengthening internal institutional decision-making and (3) introducing transparent procedures for funding and leadership selection.

Policy recommendations

Safeguarding academic freedom requires coordinated structural reform that addresses both overt repression and informal mechanisms of control. The following recommendations focus on practical measures that can realistically operate within hybrid political systems in Central Asia and particularly in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, while strengthening compliance with international human rights standards. These recommendations apply broadly across the three countries under analysis, although their implementation may vary depending on national legal and institutional contexts. Given that the identified challenges share similar institutional roots, many policy responses can be formulated at the regional level. In line with Appendix I of the WGAF Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom, these recommendations address both *de jure* protection, including legal and policy safeguards, and de facto protection, including protection from retaliation, institutional autonomy, transparent governance, student academic freedom and safeguards against self-censorship.

To the national governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan:

- Align national legal protection with **state international human rights obligations** under the ICCPR, especially Articles 18 and 19, as well as the ICESCR, especially Articles 13 and 15(1)(3).

- Make possible national legal **limitations** on academic freedom consistent with international obligations under Article 4 and Article 19 of the ICCPR and Article 4 of the ICESCR.

- Ensure that national laws and university regulations are interpreted and applied in line with UN HRC and CESCR's Concluding Observations addressed to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, particularly regarding freedom of expression, freedom of freedom of conscience and religious belief, freedom of peaceful assembly, right to education, cultural rights and the right to access to, to participate in and to enjoy science and its benefits.

- Require that any **restrictions** on academic activity:
  - be based on written legal grounds,
  - include detailed justification,
  - satisfy necessity and proportionality standards,
  - be subject to appeal,
  - be applied in a non-discriminatory and content-neutral manner and
  - not be used to punish criticism of state institutions, university governance or prevailing political, social, religious or cultural narratives.

- Adopt a joint Ministry of Justice–Ministry of Education regulation defining the application of national security and extremism laws in academic contexts. This should include **clear interpretative guidance for universities**, courts, law enforcement bodies and public authorities to prevent the misuse of broad security-related provisions against legitimate Fresearch, teaching, publication or public commentary.

- Clarify the application of existing legal provisions to ensure that references to 'cultural values', 'traditions' and 'moral foundations' cannot be used to restrict academic research, teaching or publication unless such restrictions meet **legality, necessity and proportionality standards**.

- Introduce in national legislation **students' right to academic freedom**. This should include students' rights to learn, research, discuss, organise, participate in academic associations and express academic views without intimidation, surveillance, discrimination or retaliation.

- Mandate **annual public reporting** by the Ministry of Education on:
  - the number of disciplinary proceedings involving academic expression,
  - refusals to approve academic events,
  - formal restrictions imposed on research activities,
  - cases involving dismissal, contract non-renewal or denial of promotion linked to academic expression,
  - complaints or appeals submitted by faculty, researchers or students concerning interference with academic freedom and
  - measures taken to remedy violations.

- Require that **state research grants** be allocated through transparent, peer-reviewed procedures.

- Publish **evaluation criteria** and **funding decisions**. Funding decisions should include sufficient reasoning to allow applicants to understand the basis of rejection or approval and, where appropriate, challenge procedural irregularities.

- Separate political oversight bodies from **scientific review committees**. Members of scientific review bodies should be selected on the basis of academic expertise and should be protected from political, ideological, commercial or security-sector interference.

- Allocate a defined percentage of **competitive funding** (eg, 10–15 percent) to investigator-driven social science and humanities research, including policy-critical topics. This is particularly important in the three countries under analysis, where politically sensitive research areas may be indirectly discouraged through funding priorities, informal red lines or institutional self-censorship.

- Ensure that **procedures for foreign-funded academic activities** are transparent, time-bound and do not restrict academic content or collaboration.

- **Prohibit** disciplinary sanctions or contract non-renewal solely on the basis of lawful academic expression.

- Introduce mandatory **written reasoning** and **appeal rights** for all dismissal decisions involving faculty members. This should also apply to denial of promotion, exclusion from research projects, cancellation of courses or administrative measures that may function as indirect retaliation.

- Establish **whistleblower protections** for reporting political or security-sector interference.

To universities:

- Develop and publish an **institutional Academic Freedom and Integrity Policy** explicitly protecting:
  - research independence;
  - publication rights;
  - classroom autonomy;
  - academic participation in public debate;
  - student academic freedom;
  - participation in institutional governance; and
  - freedom to criticise university policies and governance without retaliation.

- Include **explicit anti-retaliation clauses** protecting faculty who raise concerns about interference. These clauses should also protect students, researchers and administrative staff who report censorship, political pressure, discrimination, surveillance or other restrictions on academic freedom.

- Create Academic Freedom **Review Panels** composed of elected faculty representatives; one legal expert; one external academic advisor; and elected student representatives. These panels should be independent from university management and should have a clear mandate to review alleged violations of academic freedom, including event cancellations, publication disputes, disciplinary proceedings and complaints about political or ideological interference.

- Require **written decisions** in cases involving event refusals, publication disputes or disciplinary actions related to research content. Such decisions should explain the legal and institutional basis for the decision and provide information on available appeal mechanisms.

- Ensure **meaningful faculty representation** in curriculum design, research councils and institutional governance bodies.

- Adopt **transparent criteria** for rector and dean selection, reducing purely political appointment practices. Selection and appointment procedures should be based on academic and managerial competence, include consultation with the academic community and avoid political loyalty as a decisive criterion.

- Guarantee: formal notification of allegations; access to evidence; right to representation; written reasoned decisions; and internal appeal procedures. Fear often stems not from law itself, but from unpredictability. **Procedural clarity** reduces self-censorship.

To civil society and the private sector:

- Develop a Central Asian Academic Freedom **Incident Tracker** documenting:
  - type of interference,
  - legal basis invoked,
  - institutional response,
  - outcome,
  - whether the affected person was a faculty member, researcher, student or administrator,
  - whether the case involved dismissal, disciplinary sanction, event cancellation, publication restriction, surveillance, funding pressure or self-censorship and
  - whether any remedy or appeal was available.

- Publish annual **shadow reports** assessing compliance with international human rights law, especially Article 13 and Article 15 of the ICESCR and Article 19 of the ICCPR.

- Create **rapid-response legal networks** for academics facing disciplinary or criminal proceedings. These networks should also support students and

researchers facing intimidation, administrative pressure or restrictions related to academic expression.

- Develop **template appeal letters** and **procedural guides** for affected scholars. These materials should explain available domestic remedies, university complaint procedures, international human rights standards and practical steps for documenting violations.
- Facilitate **independent peer-reviewed publication platforms** insulated from domestic political pressure. Such platforms should use transparent editorial standards and regional or international peer-review mechanisms to protect scholarly quality and independence.
- Establish small competitive **grant funds** for early-career researchers, particularly in the social sciences.

To regional and international actors (OSCE, EU, UN agencies, international donors):

- Include measurable academic freedom **indicators** in higher education cooperation agreements.
- Link parts of education reform **funding to progress** in institutional autonomy and procedural safeguards.
- Support the development of implementing regulations and **interpretative guidance** to ensure that legal safeguards of academic freedom are applied in line with international human rights law.
- Offer technical models for peer review systems, ombudsperson offices and dispute resolution mechanisms.
- Strengthen scholar-at-risk **fellowships** and temporary **relocation schemes** within the region.
- Support **cross-border academic networks** to reduce professional isolation.

Conclusion

Academic freedom in Central Asia is less an abstract ideal than a rights-based entitlement of a society's capacity to think, innovate and correct itself. This brief shows that modest openings will not endure without clear rules, predictable procedures and protected spaces for independent inquiry — in law as much as in practice. The policy recommendations proposed here are deliberately practical: they rewire incentives, close loopholes and create safe channels for research, debate and contestation without destabilising states. Governments, universities, civil society and international partners each hold a piece of the solution; only together they can replace fear with process and privileges with rights. If policymakers treat academic freedom as a rights-based investment rather than a risk, Central Asian universities can become engines of knowledge that serve citizens, not only state narratives. The choice is simple and urgent: preserve the conditions for thinking, and the region's future will be better able to meet its own challenges.

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