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Rising Concerns on Erosion of Academic Freedom in the EU

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Academic Freedom Monitor 2024 found a slow and steady erosion of academic freedom in the EU, mainly due to political interference and institutional censorship, especially over academics' and students' expressions on geopolitical issues. Seven EU countries score below the EU average Academic Freedom Index, and lower than 2023. Amid rising civil society calls, EU Guidelines on Academic Freedom are expected soon by the Commission.

The findings of the Academic Freedom Monitor 2024 underscore alarming trends for academic freedom in the EU. As seven member states were observed with declining indexes and seven with rising violation reports, academic freedom "is under threat even in countries that previously stood in its defence".

This year's Monitor included for the first time a combination of two analyses; a de jure report on the legal provisions of EU member states on academic freedom and a de facto report focusing on ten EU countries. The outcome of the overall report includes EU-level policy proposals to strengthen academic freedom in the EU.

De Jure Analysis found a lack of a common definition of what academic freedom is and who is to be protected

Authored by Vasiliki Kosta and Olga Ceran from the University of Leiden, the first part of the report is titled “Academic Freedom Monitor 2024: Overview of De Jure Academic Freedom Protection”. After an overview of the constitutional legal provisions of academic freedom across all EU Member States, the study focuses on four EU Member States: Germany, Greece, The Netherlands and Poland.

According to findings of the de jure report, there are "different but functionally equivalent" concepts of academic freedom in the constitutions or other legal provisions in the countries studied. For example, in Germany there is no direct reference to educational institutions, yet courts have already established relevant cases. In The Netherlands there is ambivalence between concepts of provisions from national and international law. Sometimes this may be at the expense of academic freedom.

There are also differences among the countries over who is the rights-holder, as in some countries the catalogue of protected entities includes only universities. For example, in Germany along with universities, protection includes museums and research institutions. Students are not always clearly included as protected.

Other differences refer to state obligations on the protection of academic freedom. In some states, there are negative obligations provisioned. This means that the state has to not interfere, because if it does so, it may be at the expense of academic freedom. Germany and Greece on the other hand, also include positive state obligations, such as by foreseeing the provision of resources in order to secure academic freedom.

The researchers suggested the conduction of further comparative research on the similarities and differences of legal provisions on academic freedom among countries, as it may help formulate policy proposals for the future.

De facto Analysis found that academic freedom threats are linked to academics' and students' expressions over geopolitical issues such as the war in Gaza

Authored by Peter Maassen, Jens Jungblut, Dennis Martinsen, and Veslemøy Øvrebø from the University of Oslo, the de facto study provides an updated overview of recent country- specific measurements of academic freedom across the EU. Secondly, in includes a country-specific qualitative analysis of various data

and input from stakeholders and academics on the de facto state of academic freedom in 10 EU Member States: Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Slovakia and Sweden.

As observed by the 2024 Academic Freedom Index (AFI) update, there is a "slight deterioration" of state of academic freedom in the EU between 2023 and 2024. "Of the nine EU Member States with an academic freedom score below the EU average, only Greece and Poland have a higher score for 2024 than for 2023. The other seven Member States in this group, Austria, Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania, Croatia, the Netherlands and Hungary, scored lower in the AFI 2024 update than in the AFI 2023." read the report.

During the period 2013-2023 "significant declines" in the AFI were observed for five EU member states - Austria, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, and Hungary, noting that Hungary's situation is "particularly worrying as it ranks in 2024 among the bottom 20-30% of countries in the world"

As documented in the Scholars at Risk (SAR) 2024 report, violations of academic freedom were observed in seven EU Member States, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain. "Most of the reported cases concern how government and institutional leaders have responded to academic and student actions in relation to the Gaza-Israel conflict, highlighting the rising challenges for academic freedom in the EU in relation to geopolitical developments", according to the report.

Conclusions of the study include that "While this study confirms that concerns about the state of de facto academic freedom in the EU are justified, there is a need to further strengthen the knowledge base on the main trends and threats to academic freedom in order to develop appropriate measures to counter the erosion of academic freedom in Europe".

Background and Next Steps

In May 2025, the 2025 Forum of Inspireurope+ - Supporting Researchers at Risk, was organised in Paris. Among the outcomes of the Forum was a civil society organisations' campaign calling "Europe to champion academic freedom and protect academics at risk", especially in the next MFF and the upcoming European Research Area Act. The European University Association and other signatories of the campaign called for the establishment of a permanent European fellowship scheme for researchers at risk.

In June, the Cult Committee of the European Parliament, commissioning the Academic Freedom Monitor since 2022, raised academic freedom concerns in a relevant public hearing in the parliament for the presentation of the Monitor to MEPs and in the adopted resolution on the European University Alliance, tabled to be voted in the next plenary in September.

The European Commission's recently launched Choose Europe for Science initiative "puts a strong emphasis on academic freedom".

The Commission's report on guiding principles for protecting fundamental academic values, is expected soon, by the early fall at the latest.

Find the de jure report here and the de facto report here

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