

“Threats to academic freedom and autonomy of higher education institutions in Europe”

Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 2189 (2020)

(Reply adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 3 June 2021
at the 1405th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)

1. The Committee of Ministers has carefully considered Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 2189 (2020) and forwarded it to the Steering Committee for Educational Policy and Practice (CDPPE) for information and possible comments.
2. The Committee of Ministers thanks the Parliamentary Assembly for its commitment to democratic education and to democratic higher education in particular. It is convinced that academic freedom and the autonomy of higher education institutions in Europe are essential components of democratic societies. They are indeed vital to developing a culture of democracy, namely the set of attitudes and behaviours without which institutions, laws and elections cannot be democratic in practice.
3. The Council of Europe has contributed substantially and for many years to the development of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The Committee of Ministers joins the Assembly in welcoming the Declaration of the Global Forum on academic freedom, institutional autonomy and the future of democracy held in June 2019 in Strasbourg.
4. The Committee of Ministers is mindful of the role of higher education in helping to shape the post-Covid-19 world. In this connection, it would like to draw the Assembly's attention to the Political Declaration on the Education response to Covid-19, adopted by the CDPPE and endorsed by the informal conference of Ministers of Education organised under the Greek Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers on 29 October 2020, and to the accompanying Road map for Action, whose overarching purpose is to ensure the right to education also in times of crisis. For higher education and research, this requires that academic freedom and institutional autonomy be observed also under these circumstances.
5. With regard to the Organisation's wider work in this field, the Committee of Ministers refers to the Council of Europe's Education Programme which will continue its longstanding work on furthering academic freedom, institutional autonomy and student and staff participation in higher education governance. This will be done through the Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, for which a guidance document on higher education was published in 2020; the project on the democratic mission of higher education; and the Council of Europe's contribution to the further development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).
6. In this respect, with regard to the definition¹ of academic freedom adopted in Rome by EHEA ministers and its consideration by the Council of Europe, it should be noted that the Council of Europe has been one of the main contributors to the work of the EHEA since its inception, as the Bologna Process, in 1999. The Council of Europe will also contribute to the work to be conducted within the EHEA to map the *de facto* and *de jure* state of academic freedom within the EHEA.

¹ Academic freedom designates the freedom of the academic community – including academic staff and students – in respect of research, teaching and learning and, more broadly, the dissemination of research and teaching outcomes both within and outside the higher education sector. In essence, the concept ensures that the academic community may engage in research, teaching, learning and communication in society without fear of reprisal.

7. The Committee of Ministers has taken due note of the Assembly's concerns over "negative actions in some member States violating or undermining academic freedom and institutional autonomy". In this regard, the Committee of Ministers calls on all States Parties to the European Cultural Convention to fully comply with their fundamental obligations in order to prevent the shrinking of the democratic space in Europe.

8. The Committee of Ministers thanks the Assembly for its proposals aiming to enhance the fundamental values of higher education. Of the actions outlined, the Committee of Ministers has noted the possibility, in the years to come, of drawing up an action plan to give policy advice on academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and assessing the feasibility of a binding instrument in this respect.