

This initiative is a contribution towards the
New Democratic Pact for Europe



Academic Freedom in Action 2025

Strasbourg, 25-26 November 2025

Introduction

Academic freedom is a cornerstone of democratic societies and an essential condition for independent research, critical thinking, and the pursuit of knowledge. Yet, across Europe and globally, academic freedom faces increasing pressures - from legislative and political interference to threats against scholars and shrinking institutional autonomy. The erosion of academic freedom does not occur in isolation; it often signals broader challenges to democratic resilience, freedom of expression, and human rights. As such, protecting academic freedom must be recognised not only as a responsibility of the academic sector but as a shared democratic imperative.

The Academic Freedom in Action 2025 Conference brings together parliamentarians, state representatives, academics, civil society actors, international organisations, and legal experts to take stock of the current situation, share innovative practices, and explore avenues for coordinated action. Organised by the Council of Europe Education Department, this event is to shape the collective response to increasing threats, and it will mark the launch of the Council of Europe's first Report on the Erosion of Academic Freedom and the Academic Freedom Insights. These documents provide evidence-based insights into threats, recommend actions for universities, governments, and international partners, while also providing a basis for the continued action and policy development under the Council of Europe's initiative.

The programme of the Conference features high-level sessions highlighting political, legal, and institutional responses. On the first day, parliamentarians and state representatives will offer perspectives on how democratic institutions can protect academic freedom through legislation, observatories, and support mechanisms. A dedicated panel will examine the critical role of sanctuary programmes for at-risk scholars, demonstrating how these efforts

strengthen and protect not only individual rights but also the democratic mission of higher education. The intersection between academic freedom and legal protections under the European Convention on Human Rights will also be explored in a session involving judges and legal experts, alongside a parallel discussion on constitutional safeguards, in cooperation with the Venice Commission.

In a time of growing uncertainty, Academic Freedom in Action 2025 offers a space not only to diagnose challenges but to catalyse meaningful change. Through dialogue, cooperation, and shared commitment, this conference aims to reinforce academic freedom as a pillar of democratic life—one that must be defended with renewed urgency and sustained action.

Programme

Tuesday, 25 November 2025

Palais de l'Europe, Room 6

08:30 Arrival of participants and welcome coffee

09:00-09:30 **Opening Session – High-Level Addresses**

Mr Bjørn Berge, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe

Mr Balázs Hankó, Minister for Culture and Innovation of Hungary

Mr Pap Ndiaye, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of France to the Council of Europe

09:30 – 11:00

Session 1

Academic Freedom and Democratic Institutions: Parliamentary Perspectives

Academic freedom is closely linked to the state of democratic institutions. Legislators play a decisive role in developing legal and political frameworks that can either protect or undermine academic freedom. This high-level session will bring together parliamentarians to reflect on how parliaments, as representatives of the democratic will, can defend academic freedom against infringements and threats, and promote the conditions necessary

for open and critical research. This session will explore recent initiatives and frameworks at both national and European levels.

Guiding Questions:

1. Parliamentary responsibility: What role should parliaments play in safeguarding academic freedom as part of their duty to uphold democratic institutions?
2. Legislative frameworks: What examples exist of laws or parliamentary initiatives that have effectively protected (or threatened) academic freedom?
3. Oversight and accountability: How can parliaments hold governments accountable when academic freedom is restricted?
4. European and multilateral cooperation: How do initiatives such as the STOA Academic Freedom project, the ERA policy agenda, and parliamentary work on Horizon Europe and in ITRE contribute to strengthening academic freedom at the European level; the work on protecting and promoting academic freedom by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), such as the 2020 report on threats to academic freedom by the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media
5. Responding to challenges: What are the most urgent threats to academic freedom today, and how can legislators respond without politicising or instrumentalising universities?
6. Dialogue with academia: How can parliaments ensure stronger connections with universities, researchers, and civil society to inform policy-making?

Moderator: Mr Villano Qiriazzi, Head of Council of Europe Education Department

Mr. Christian Ehler, Member of the European Parliament, Co-chair of the Panel for the Future of Science and Technology (STOA); Member of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE); rapporteur on Horizon Europe and the ERA policy agenda

Ms Luz Martinez Seijo, Chairperson of the PACE Sub Committee on Culture, Education and Democratic Values

Mr Koloman Brenner, author of the PACE 2020 Report on Threats to academic freedom and autonomy of higher education institutions in Europe; Member of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media

Mr. Ville Niinistö, Member of the European Parliament; Member of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE); engaged in European initiatives on democracy, science and academic freedom

Session 2

Academic Freedom and the European Court of Human Rights: Legal Pathways and Challenges

This session will explore how freedom of expression under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights intersects with academic freedom, as well as its connections with the right to education under Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 and the rights to private life and freedom of thought, conscience and religion under Articles 8 and 9 of the Convention. The conversation will examine how the Court's jurisprudence has shaped the understanding of academic freedom to date, and how it could evolve further to provide stronger safeguards. Beyond the legal reasoning, the session will also reflect on what this means in practice for academics, universities, and society at large, in contexts where academic freedom is contested. Particular attention will be given to the role of strategic litigation, the identification of legal and procedural gaps, and the opportunities and challenges in bringing cases before the Court.

Moderator: **Ms Janneke Gerards**, Professor of fundamental rights law, University of Utrecht

Proposed Format:

- A conversation between ECHR judges and legal experts
- Discussion of legal gaps and procedural challenges

Participants:

Ms Ivana Jelić, Vice President and Judge of the European Court of Human Rights

Mr Davor Derenčinović, Judge of the European Court of Human Rights

Mr Mateja Đurović, Judge of the European Court of Human Rights

Mr. Zoltan Ronay, Professor, Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest

Ms. Kirsten Roberts Lyer, Professor and Chair of Human Rights programme, Central European University

12h45-14:00 Lunch break

14:00-15:15

Session 3

Constitutional and Legal Safeguards for Academic Freedom: Insights from the Venice Commission

This session explores the constitutional and legal dimensions of academic freedom, drawing on the Venice Commission's expertise in reinforcing democratic standards and the rule of law. The discussion will examine how academic freedom is protected (or reduced) through constitutional texts, legislation, and judicial practice in different member states, and how these protections relate to broader democratic resilience.

Moderator: **Mr. Matjaž Gruden**, Director, Directorate for Democracy, Council of Europe

General Questions:

1. How is academic freedom protected in constitutional or legal frameworks across member states?
 - Are there examples of strong legal safeguards that could serve as models?
 - Where do we see gaps or ambiguous protections?
2. What is the relationship between academic freedom and freedom of expression in constitutional law?
 - To what extent is academic freedom treated as a distinct right versus a part of freedom of expression?
3. What role can constitutional courts or national human rights institutions play in defending academic freedom?
 - Are there landmark rulings that set important legal precedents?
4. How can the Venice Commission contribute to strengthening academic freedom?
 - Could academic freedom become a more regular part of the Commission's opinions or legal assessments?
 - How does the Commission view its potential role in this domain, drawing on its experience with media freedom or other?
5. What trends or legal developments currently pose the greatest threat to academic freedom in Europe?
 - Are there examples of laws or reforms that may seem neutral but, in practice, restrict academic autonomy or institutional independence?

Panellists:

Ms Janneke Gerards, Member. Professor of fundamental rights law, University of Utrecht

Mr Hans Petter Graver, Professor, University of Oslo

Ms. Kirsten Roberts Lyer, Professor and Chair of Human Rights programme, Central European University

Ms. Kriszta Kovács, Professor, Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest; Researcher, WZB Berlin Social Science Center

15:15-16:30

Session 4

Sanctuary and Solidarity: Defending Scholars, Upholding Democracy

Programmes supporting at-risk scholars are essential for protecting lives and liberty, as well as defending academic freedom and democratic values. By offering refuge to scholars threatened due to their research, public engagement, or peaceful exercise of their human rights, these programmes safeguard individual lives and the freedom of thought and inquiry essential to democratic societies. Through these programmes, at-risk scholars can continue their work securely, contributing to global knowledge, enriching research with diverse perspectives, and raising awareness of threats to scholars and academic freedom worldwide. Their continued presence in academia helps expose and oppose the erosion of academic freedom, which often indicates a decline in democracy. By integrating these scholars into universities and research institutions, host countries and institutions actively strengthen democratic discourse. Students, faculty, and staff benefit from engaging with scholars who have experienced firsthand the effects of authoritarianism, repression or conflict, thereby deepening their collective understanding of the importance of pluralism, free expression, and intellectual independence in a healthy democracy. However, the need for such programmes remains urgent as demand for placements far exceeds available resources. This session aims for panellists to share insights on developing effective national and regional mechanisms that support at-risk scholars and also strengthen academic freedom and democratic resilience worldwide.

General Questions:

1. How do programmes for at-risk scholars help uphold democratic values?
2. What are the key elements and the challenges to making programmes for at-risk scholars effective and sustainable?

3. How can the Council of Europe contribute to overcoming these challenges? What role should the Council of Europe play in supporting at-risk scholars?
4. How can we ensure that support for at-risk scholars remains a priority in shifting political climates?

Moderator/Presenter: **Mr Frank Geary**, Director, Scholars at Risk - SAR Europe

Panellists:

Mr Frank Albrecht, Head of Division Philipp Schwartz Initiative and Academic Freedom, Alexander von Humboldt Foundation

Ms Lauren Berntsen, SAIH Norwegian Students at Risk programme

Ms Annie Cottier, University of Bern, SAR Switzerland

Ms Stefanie Kottowski, SAFE Programme, DAAD

Ms Laura Lohéac, Executive Director, PAUSE, Collège de France

16:30-16:45 Coffee break

16:45-17:45

Session 5

International Global Currents, Shared Struggles: Academic Freedom under Pressure Worldwide

Academic freedom is facing growing pressure across regions and political systems. This session will explore key developments beyond Europe, highlighting patterns such as restrictive legislation, governance reforms, attacks on institutional autonomy, and pressures arising from geopolitical tensions. By examining diverse regional experiences, the session will consider how global trends intersect, reinforce, or diverge from one another, and how they shape the broader international landscape for academic freedom. It will reflect on emerging responses from higher education institutions, civil society, international organisations, and multilateral partnerships, and discuss how global solidarity and cooperation can be strengthened to counter these pressures. The session will offer comparative perspectives and identify evolving strategies to protect and promote academic freedom worldwide.

Guiding questions:

1. What global trends are influencing academic freedom, and how do they appear across regions?

2. How do experiences beyond Europe reflect or inform challenges within Europe?
3. How can Europe and the Council of Europe support and reinforce academic freedom internationally?

Moderator: Ms. Marie-Anne Persoons, Chair of the Council of Europe Steering Committee on Education

Panellists:

- **Mr Robert Quinn**, Executive Director, Scholars at Risk (SAR Global)
- **Mr Mircea Dumitru**, Professor; member and Vice-President of the Romanian Academy
- **Mr Terence Karran**, Professor, University of Lincoln
- **Mr. Peter Maassen**, Professor, University of Oslo
- **Ms Yadira Pinilla**, Senior Specialist, Department for Human Development, Education and Employment, Organization of American States
- **Ms Bencharat Sae Chua**, Director, Southeast Asia Coalition for Academic Freedom (SEACAF)
- **Mr. Noah W Sobe**, Chief, Higher Education Section in the Division for Policies and Lifelong Learning Systems, UNESCO


17:45-18:30

Reception, "Blue Restaurant"

Wednesday, 26 November 2025

Palais de l'Europe, Room 6

08:30-9:00 Arrival of participants and welcome coffee

09:00-10:00

Session 6

Launch of the Report on the Erosion of Academic Freedom in Europe

Presentation of the Report on the Erosion of Academic Freedom prepared by experts within the framework of the Council of Europe's Working Group on Democratic Mission of Higher Education. The session will offer a snapshot of current trends, threat and risks, and proposed avenues for action, drawing on monitoring, case analysis, and stakeholder input.

General Questions:

- What trends and red flags emerge across Europe?
- What are the recommendations for universities, states, and international bodies?
- How will the data inform future policy and protection efforts?

Author: **Mr. Peter Maassen**, Professor, University of Oslo

Co-authors:

Mr. Gergely Kovats, Professor, Corvinus University in Budapest (Chapter 3 – Political interference in academic freedom)

Mr. Zoltan Ronay, Professor, Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest (Chapter 2 – Legal restrictions on academic freedom)

10:00-11:00

Session 7

Academic Freedom Insights and Policy Development

The Academic Freedom Insights series, comprising ten policy briefs, builds upon the work of the Council of Europe Expert Working Group on the Democratic Mission of Higher Education. It explores key challenges, opportunities, and threats related to academic freedom, serving both as an awareness-raising tool and a resource for policy development. Each brief addresses a specific dimension of academic freedom, reflecting priority areas identified by the Expert Working Group.

Beyond raising awareness, the series is a key resource for the Council of Europe's work on policy development and for partners across Europe and beyond. By promoting dialogue on academic freedom, the *Insights* series aims to support concrete action to strengthen democratic societies.

Moderator and presenter: **Ms. Kirsten Roberts Lyer**, Professor and Chair of Human Rights programme, Central European University

Panellists and authors of the Insights:

Ms. Rose Anne Cuschieri, Education Advisor, Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, Malta

Mr. Gergely Kovats, Professor, Corvinus University in Budapest

Mr. Peter Maassen, Professor, University of Oslo

Ms. Paola Mattei, Professor, University of Milan

Ms. Denise Roche, Advocacy Manager, Scholars at Risk Europe

Mr. Zoltan Ronay, Professor, Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest

11:00-11:15 Coffee break

11:15-12:30

Session 8

Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression: Synergies Across Sectors

This session will explore how academic freedom - as part of the broader right to freedom of expression - can be more effectively integrated into the Council of Europe's wider efforts to uphold democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Building on the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy and the Secretary General's New Democratic Pact, the discussion will highlight the interconnectedness of freedoms that enable democratic life: academic, media, artistic, and cultural.

By bringing together experts from across the Organisation, the session will examine how the protection and promotion of freedom of expression in different domains can mutually reinforce one another. It will also identify practical avenues for cooperation — ensuring that academic freedom benefits from and contributes to ongoing work on media freedom, artistic freedom, and the protection of human rights defenders.

Guiding Questions:

- How can academic freedom be understood and protected as an integral part of the right to freedom of expression, as enshrined in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights?
- What synergies can be developed between the Council of Europe's work on academic freedom, media freedom, artistic freedom, and the protection of human rights defenders?
- How can these sectors collaborate to strengthen safeguards against censorship, intimidation, or disinformation - both online and offline - while promoting pluralism, diversity, and open democratic debate?
- What concrete steps could be taken to integrate freedom of expression and academic freedom into monitoring, reporting, and standard-setting across the Organisation?

Moderator/Presenter: **Ms. Irena Guidikova**, Head of Democratic Institutions and Freedoms Department, Council of Europe


Panellists:

Mr. Gergely Kovats, Professor, Corvinus University in Budapest, Member of the Council of Europe Expert Group on Democratic Mission of Higher Education

Mr. Pavlo Pushkar, Head of Division, Execution of Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, Council of Europe

Ms. Denise Roche, Advocacy Manager, Scholars at Risk Europe, Member of the Council of Europe Expert Group on Democratic Mission of Higher Education

Ms. Sara Whyatt, Independent Expert for the Council of Europe Free to Create - Create to be Free Project; Freemuse Research Director



12:30-12:45

Closing remarks

Mr. Matjaž Gruden, Director, Directorate for Democracy, Council of Europe