COUNCIL OF EUROPE

CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Academic Freedom in Action 2026

Strasbourg, 25-26 November 2026

Introduction

Academic freedom is fundamental to democratic societies. It enables independent research, critical inquiry and the free exchange of ideas, while underlying the ability of universities to contribute to democratic governance, the rule of law and the protection of human rights. When academic freedom is weakened, the consequences extend far beyond higher education, affecting democratic resilience, public trust, scientific progress and the capacity of societies to respond to complex challenges.

Across Europe and beyond, academic freedom continues to face significant pressures, ranging from political interference and restrictions on institutional autonomy to growing threats against scholars and constraints on freedom of expression. At the same time, recent experiences from different countries demonstrate that academic freedom can also be strengthened and restored through determined institutional, legal and political action. Protecting academic freedom is therefore not only a matter for universities, but a shared responsibility of public authorities, independent institutions, civil society and the wider international community.

Against this backdrop, the Academic Freedom in Action 2026 Conference brings together policymakers, academics, students, civil society organisations, international organisations, human rights institutions and legal experts to move beyond identifying challenges and towards discussing practical responses. Organised by the Council of Europe Education Department, the conference aims to strengthen cooperation and contribute to a more coherent European approach to safeguarding academic freedom.

The conference is built around four central questions:

- Why does academic freedom matter for democracy, human rights and the rule of law?
- Who shares responsibility for protecting it?
- Which legal, institutional and policy mechanisms are most effective in safeguarding academic freedom?
- How can we strengthen protection and move from analysis to concrete action?

The programme reflects this progression. It begins by exploring academic freedom as a democratic value and a shared public responsibility, before examining legal and institutional safeguards, emerging policy developments and mechanisms for cooperation. It then turns to the lived experiences of scholars and students, the global challenges facing higher education, and practical approaches to strengthening academic freedom through dialogue, partnership and international solidarity.

A central objective of the conference is to encourage closer cooperation among the diverse actors working to protect academic freedom. Building on the momentum generated by previous Council of Europe initiatives, the conference will also provide an opportunity to discuss future forms of collaboration and coordinated action across the Council of Europe area.

At a time when democratic societies face profound and rapidly evolving challenges, Academic Freedom in Action 2026 seeks not only to deepen understanding of academic freedom, but also to contribute to its practical protection. By bringing together diverse perspectives and promoting dialogue across institutional boundaries, the conference aims to reinforce academic freedom as a shared democratic responsibility and to identify concrete ways of strengthening its protection for the future.

Programme

Wednesday, 25 November 2026

Palais de l'Europe, Room 10

08:30 Arrival of participants and welcome coffee

09:00-09:20 **Opening Session – High-Level Address**

Ms. Tanja Gonggrijp, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe

Conference Host

Ms. Claudia Luciani, Director for Democracy; **Mr. Villano Qiriazi,** Head of the Education Department, Council of Europe

09:20 – 09:50 Keynote Address

Protecting Academic Freedom: A Shared Responsibility for Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law

Ms. Kirsten Roberts Lyer, Professor and Chair of Human Rights programme, Central European University; a keynote presentation of the report "Legal Protections for Academic Freedom and Feasibility of a Council of Europe Convention on Academic Freedom"

09:50-11:05

Session 1

Beyond Safe Conversations – part 1: Academic Freedom in Difficult Contexts

Co-organised with the Inter-University Centre (IUC), this session will address academic freedom challenges in politically sensitive and complex national contexts that are often absent from mainstream international discussions. Panellists will reflect on how universities, scholars, and international networks navigate situations marked by conflict, democratic backsliding, or restrictions on civic space, while exploring possibilities for solidarity and institutional support.

Session Chair: **Mr. Ivan Šimonović,** Director General of the Inter University Centre (IUC), Professor, University of Zagreb, Croatia

Panellists:

Mr. Wieger Bakker, Deputy Director General of the Inter University Centre (IUC); Professor, University of Utrecht, The Netherlands

Ms. Snježana Prijić Samaržija, Professor and former Rector, University of Rijeka, Croatia; Vice-Chair of the Inter University Centre Council (IUC); Member of the Council of Europe Bureau of the Steering Committee on Education

Mr. Giga Zedania, Director of the Centre for Advanced Studies and former Rector, Ilia State University, Georgia

11:05-11:20 Coffee break

11:20-12:35

Session 1

Beyond Safe Conversations – part 2: Challenges to Academic Freedom and Experiences of Democratic and Institutional Recovery

Alongside examining the challenges to academic freedom, the session will also explore emerging experiences of democratic and institutional recovery, asking what lessons can be drawn from efforts to rebuild academic freedom and public trust in changing political contexts.

Session Chair: **Mr. Ivan Šimonović,** Director General of the Inter University Centre (IUC), Professor, University of Zagreb, Croatia

Panellists:

Mr. Dominik Antonowicz, Professor, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Poland

Mr. Tarlach McGonagle, Professor, University of Leiden, The Netherlands

Mr. Zoltán Rónay, Professor, Eotvos Lorand University, Hungary

12h45-14:00 Lunch break

14:00-15:15

Session 2

Academic Freedom and the Future of Knowledge: Democratic Participation, Contested Expertise, and AI

As science becomes increasingly central to addressing societal challenges, the relationship between research, democracy, and public trust is being reshaped by political polarisation, disinformation, the growing contestation of expertise, and the rapid development of artificial intelligence. This panel will explore how universities and research institutions can strengthen democratic engagement through open science and public participation while safeguarding academic freedom and scientific integrity.

The discussion will examine the pressures facing scholars working on politically contested topics, including climate change, migration, gender, and public health, and consider how higher education institutions can protect independent research while fostering more inclusive, participatory, and trusted forms of knowledge production. Bringing these perspectives together, the panel will reflect on how science can remain open to society while also remaining resilient in the face of growing political and ideological pressures.

The session will also consider how the increasing use of AI is reshaping academic freedom, teaching, learning, and knowledge production. While AI may expand access to knowledge and create new opportunities for research and education, it also raises questions about institutional and academic autonomy, transparency, and the growing dependence of academic communities on AI systems whose underlying knowledge bases and assumptions may reflect cultural, linguistic, and epistemic biases. The panel will explore how universities can engage critically with these technologies while preserving intellectual diversity, academic agency, and the conditions for open and independent inquiry.

Session Chair: **Mr Peter Maassen,** Professor at the University of Oslo, Norway

Panellists:

Mr. Klaus Beiter, Professor, North-West University South Africa

Ms. Hanane Karimi, Professor, University of Strasbourg, France; Co-director of Research Area 2 of the Franco-Quebec Chair on Freedom of Expression (COLIBEX); CNRS

Ms Paola Mattei, Professor, University of Milan, Italy

Ms. Snježana Prijić Samaržija, Professor and former Rector, University of Rijeka, Croatia; Member of the Council of Europe Bureau of the Steering Committee on Education

15:15-16:30

Session 3

Academic Freedom: Building Cooperation for More Effective Protection

The growing number of initiatives dedicated to academic freedom across Europe reflects both the urgency of the challenges facing higher education and the increasing commitment of universities, international organisations, academic networks, civil society organisations and public authorities to addressing them. At the same time, this expanding landscape raises an important question: how can these efforts become more visible, better connected and mutually reinforcing?

This session will provide an opportunity to explore how cooperation among existing actors could be further strengthened. Participants will consider whether there is value in establishing a mechanism for collaboration - such as a network, platform or other form of structured cooperation - to facilitate dialogue across sectors and support more coherent and coordinated action. The discussion will focus on the potential objectives, added value and possible functions of such a mechanism, including knowledge-sharing, policy dialogue, communication, networking and collective responses to emerging challenges.

Recognising that these questions cannot be answered by any single institution, the session will adopt a highly participatory format. Through facilitated discussions and structured exchanges, participants will be invited to share their perspectives on existing needs and opportunities for collaboration, what any future collaborative mechanism should seek to achieve, whom it should serve, and how it could best complement existing initiatives while avoiding unnecessary duplication.

The discussion will also provide an opportunity to consider how enhanced cooperation could strengthen links not only within the academic community but also with governments, human rights institutions, international organisations and civil society, thereby reinforcing academic freedom as a shared democratic responsibility.

The outcomes of the session will inform reflections on possible next steps for strengthening cooperation within the Council of Europe area.

- Scholars At Risk (SAR)
- Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung, Germany
- Inter-University Centre Dubrovnik (IUC), Croatia
- Global Observatory on Academic Freedom, UK
- Observatoire des atteintes à la liberté académique (OALA), France

Moderators of the breakout sessions - Members of the Council of Europe Expert Working Group on the Democratic Mission of Higher Education

16:30-16:45 Coffee break

16:45-18:00

Session 4

Voices at Risk: Testimonies, Solidarity, and Protecting Scholars Under Threat

Behind discussions of academic freedom are individual scholars whose lives, careers, and personal safety have been profoundly affected by repression, conflict, political persecution, or institutional retaliation. This session will bring the human dimension of academic freedom into focus through first-hand testimonies from scholars who have experienced threats, displacement, censorship, or exclusion as a result of their academic work or public engagement.

Building on these testimonies, a discussion with experts and representatives of organisations supporting scholars at risk will examine how institutions, governments, and international actors can move from emergency response to more sustainable protection, solidarity, and long-term academic inclusion. The session will illustrate the realities faced by at-risk scholars and strengthen understanding of the practical mechanisms needed to support them.

Session Chair: **Ms Denise Roche**, Advocacy Manager, Scholars at Risk Europe

Introduction: **Testimonies**

Ms Raha Sabet Sarvestany, Postdoctoral Researcher, Åbo Akademi University, Finland

Mr Haftom Bayray, SAR Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Food and Resource Economics, University of Copenhagen

Panellists:

Ms Emily Borzcik, Europe Director of the Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF)

Ms Mandy Lee, Assistant Professor at the Centre for Health Policy and Management, Trinity College Dublin, University of Dublin, Ireland

Ms Anne Weyembergh, Vice-Rector for International Relations and Cooperation at the Université libre de Bruxelles

Ms Oksana Seumenicht, Programme Director of Academic Freedom Dialogues, Division Philipp Schwartz Initiative and Academic Freedom, Alexander von Humboldt Foundation

18:00-19:00

Reception, "Blue Restaurant"

Thursday, 26 November 2026

Palais de l'Europe, Room 10

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

09:00-09:10 **Address**

Mr. Salvatore Aricò, International Science Council CEO

09:10-10:10

Session 5

Students and Academic Freedom

Students, including doctoral students, are central actors in academic communities and democratic life, yet discussions on academic freedom often focus primarily on institutional or staff perspectives. This session will explore the role of students in advancing and defending academic freedom, including questions related to freedom of expression on campus, participation in university governance, student activism, and the creation of inclusive and open learning environments.

Session Chair: **Mr Terence Karran,** Emeritus Professor, Lincoln University, UK

Panellists:

Mr Norbert Bencze, President, European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers (Eurodoc)

Ms. Lauren Berntsen, SAIH Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund

Ms. Liz Jackson, Professor and Associate Dean of Research, Karen Lo Eugene Chuang Professor of Diversity and Equity, Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong

Ms. Cristina Mazzero, Doctoral Researcher, Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento, Italy

10:10-11:35

Session 6

From Monitoring to Action: Using Evidence to Strengthen Academic Freedom

Over the past decade, significant progress has been made in monitoring academic freedom through international indices, comparative assessments and evidence-based reporting. These initiatives have substantially improved our understanding of the challenges facing academic freedom and have provided an increasingly robust evidence base for research, policy and advocacy.

The next challenge, however, is how this evidence can be translated into more effective protection. This session will move beyond presenting existing monitoring initiatives to explore how data, assessment tools and comparative evidence can better inform public policy, institutional decision-making and international cooperation. Particular attention will be given to innovative approaches to assessment, emerging methodologies and practical examples of how monitoring results can support preventive action, strengthen institutional resilience and contribute to more effective safeguards for academic freedom.

By bringing together experts working on different monitoring and assessment frameworks, the discussion will focus on moving from diagnosis to implementation, examining not only how academic freedom is measured, but how evidence can be used to shape policies, strengthen protection mechanisms and support concrete action at institutional, national and international levels.

Session Chair: **Ms Katrin Kinzelbach,** Professor, FAU Erlangen- Nürnberg; Academic Freedom index

Panellists:

Mr. Gergely Kováts, Professor, Corvinus University, Budapest, Hungary

Mr. Peter Maassen, Professor, University of Oslo, Norway; Academic Freedom Monitor, European Parliament Panel for the Future of Science and Technology (STOA)

Mr. Liviu Matei, Professor, Director, Global Observatory on Academic Freedom at King's College, UK; Member of the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) Working

Group on Fundamental Values, European Higher Education Area (EHEA); Vice-President of the Magna Charta Observatory

Ms Denise Roche, Advocacy Manager, Scholars at Risk; Free to Think Annual Report on Academic Freedom

Ms. Monika Steinel, Deputy Secretary General, European University Association (EUA)

11:35-11:45 Coffee break

11:45-13:00

Session 7

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

Academic freedom is under growing pressure not only in Europe but globally. This closing panel will examine key developments across different regions, including recent legislative and political developments affecting higher education and research. Through comparative perspectives, panellists will explore how global trends resonate across regions, what forms of resistance and protection are emerging, and how international solidarity and cooperation can be strengthened to support scholars and institutions under pressure worldwide.

Session Chair: Mr. Villano Qiriazi, Head of the Education Department, Council of Europe

Mr. Kwadwo Appiagyei-Atua, Professor, University of Ghana; Regional Director of the Africa Coalition for Academic Freedom (ACAF)

Ms. Camilla Croso, Regional Director, Coalition for Academic Freedom in the Americas (CAFA)

Mr. Vladan Đokić, Rector of the University of Belgrade, Serbia

Mr. Noah W. Sobe, Chief of the Section for Higher Education, UNESCO

Ms. Hilligje van't Land, Secretary General, International Association of Universities (IAU)

13:00-13:10

Closing remarks

Mr. Villano Qiriazi, Head of the Education Department, Council of Europe