

ACADEMIC FREEDOM INSIGHTS SERIES

Political Interference in Academic Freedom

INTRODUCTION

Against a background of general democratic backsliding, undue political interference in academic freedom is intensifying. This takes the form of direct interference in the core dimensions of academic freedom and indirect interference in the conditions for the exercise of academic freedom. This brief discusses different forms of political interference, reflects on the role of the Council of Europe in strengthening the protection of academic freedom against political threats, and suggests policy options for further action.

Prepared by Council of Europe experts — Peter Maassen, with the collaboration of Hans de Wit and Kirsten Roberts Lyer — within the framework of the Education Department project “Academic Freedom in Action,” exploring the key challenges and policy responses that shape academic freedom in Europe.



CONTEXT

Democratic institutions and principles are under increasing pressure in Europe. Secretary General Alain Berset's new Democratic Pact for Europe underlines the Council of Europe's commitment to countering this trend and revitalising democracy.

The urgency of this commitment is underlined by the increasing efforts of some governments to mutate into 'illiberal democracies' and to abandon the rule of law. They are also forcing academia to support these ideological ideas under threat of punishment or worse. But even in European countries that identify themselves as liberal democracies, basic democratic principles can no longer be taken for granted. In this context, de facto academic freedom is threatened by political interference in the conditions under which universities and colleges operate. The resulting deterioration in the state of academic freedom requires special attention in the second pillar of the Pact, which aims to protect democracy.

FACTS & FIGURES

In a number of Council of Europe member states, political interference in academic freedom takes the form of structured violations, as shown, for example, by the Academic Freedom Index.

These include politically motivated closures of study programmes and research activities in certain fields, and serious restrictions on academic freedom of expression. In most Council of Europe member states, indirect political interference takes the form of changes to the conditions under which academia operates. As the EP Academic Freedom Monitor shows, this includes the introduction of undue restrictions on institutional autonomy, the undermining of academic self-governance, the worsening of academic working conditions and the inappropriate use of public funding as a means of political pressure. Another trend concerns the tendency of governments to exclude academics and students from higher education policy-making.





KEY CHALLENGES & DEVELOPMENTS

In its 2012 Recommendation, the Council of Europe underlined the responsibility of public authorities to protect academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

This includes the responsibility of governments to set the framework conditions for academic freedom and institutional autonomy and to continuously monitor their implementation. Since 2012, the situation of academic freedom has deteriorated and serious threats and violations of academic freedom have occurred. Instead of strengthening the protection of academic freedom, political interference has contributed to its erosion. However, this trend is not homogeneous and there is a growing divide between European countries in the conditions for academic freedom. One possible consequence is a concentration of highly talented academics in those European countries with high and increasing levels of public investment in higher education and academic research, attractive working and career conditions and opportunities, and a strong state of de facto academic freedom.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER ACTION

Countering the impact of political interference on academic freedom requires the strengthening of legal safeguards and the recognition by all Council of Europe member states that academic freedom is not only a fundamental right of the academic community, but also an important pillar of democracy. From this perspective, further action would include:



Adopt a new Recommendation on Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy that addresses the deteriorating state of academic freedom, identifies the main threats and violations, and proposes specific principles and provisions that public authorities should consider and implement.



Support the work of the European Court of Human Rights in developing and strengthening the jurisprudence on academic freedom.



Contribute to a common understanding (among stakeholders and the public) of the meaning and importance of academic freedom and institutional autonomy.



Support the establishment of a European clearing house for information and data on academic freedom.



Contribute to the dynamic process leading to a renewed commitment to reinvigorate democracy as set out in the New Democratic Pact for Europe.



Promote systematic monitoring of political interference in academic freedom in cooperation with the European Parliament's Academic Freedom Monitor and the European Higher Education Area Monitoring Initiative.

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CONCLUSION

Inappropriate political interference is one of the
main causes of the current erosion of academic
freedom in Europe.

While direct interference poses a significant threat, indirect
interference also contributes to the weakening of academic freedom
and thus of the academic community in Europe. Consequently,
undue political interference in academic freedom also weakens
the academic community's contribution to the maintenance and
strengthening of democratic principles in Europe. Strong, up-
to-date principles and provisions for the protection of academic
freedom against undue political interference should therefore
be recognised as a central element of the Pact's Action Plan for
Democracy. If Europe sees democracy as the only means of ensuring
that everyone can live in a peaceful, prosperous and free society,
then a commitment to improving the protection of academic
freedom from political interference is an essential prerequisite.

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