

ACADEMIC FREEDOM INSIGHTS SERIES

Transnational Repression and Threats Against Scholars

INTRODUCTION

Transnational repression, when state actors threaten and harass individuals across borders, is increasingly undermining academic freedom. Recent reports document repressive tactics by some foreign governments that pressure faculty, researchers and students across Europe, chilling the free exchange of ideas, and stifling research and debate. Forms of transnational repression include digital and in-person surveillance, threats to family members back home, and legal intimidation. This brief highlights recent trends and challenges, and outlines policy responses for the Council of Europe to better safeguard threatened scholars.

Prepared by Council of Europe experts Kirsten Roberts Lyer and Denise Roche, 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

Academic freedom in Europe faces threats not only domestically, as other briefs in this series have highlighted, but also from abroad. Scholars at European universities increasingly encounter intimidatory and threatening tactics originating from foreign governments (or their proxies).

These states deploy a range of covert and overt tactics, including surveillance and spyware and threats against family members back home ('coercion-by-proxy'). Their governments also exploit international law enforcement mechanisms such as Interpol's "red notices" and extradition requests to pursue academics abroad. They extend repressive laws beyond their borders, imposing travel bans, asset freezes or stigmatising

"foreign agent" labels on academics or institutions deemed critical. These pressures create a broad chilling effect on individual faculty members, researchers and students, as well as across entire research communities. Yet this transnational threat remains largely overlooked, including in discussions on academic freedom. Those targeted, particularly where it is subtle or covert, struggle to obtain help or protection.

FACTS & FIGURES

- 01** The Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly has raised alarm over acts of transnational repression occurring on European soil, including notorious assassination attempts against exiled dissidents.
- 02** The problem is on a global scale. An estimated 854 acts of 'physical transnational repression' occurred worldwide between 2014 and 2022, perpetrated by 38 governments in 91 countries.
- 03** Studies show that academics and students are increasingly becoming a focus of these threats. A 2024 Freedom House report calls repression on US campuses an "everyday threat".
- 04** The legal and policy response is only beginning. PACE has urged states to formally define "transnational repression" in domestic law and procedures, track incidents, and sanction perpetrators. However, comprehensive safeguards for scholars remain limited.

KEY CHALLENGES & DEVELOPMENTS

Despite its growing prevalence, transnational repression remains a “major blind spot” in most countries’ human rights protection systems. Specialised bodies, such as National Human Rights Institutions, rarely address these cases as part of their mandate, and many incidents fall through gaps in existing legal frameworks.

Those targeted often struggle to obtain help or justice, as local authorities may be unfamiliar with such complex, cross-border situations. Some governments have begun to respond with new laws; for example, the UK’s 2023 National Security Act created offences for foreign interference. However, enforcement is lagging, and approaches often prioritise national security responses over human rights. Under Europe’s human rights framework, states have positive obligations to investigate such cross-border abuses and protect victims on their territory. This includes a duty to investigate and punish such acts. While international responses are growing in relation to some tactics (such as spyware and SLAPPs) they remain at the early stages. Comprehensive, concrete tools to protect at-risk faculty, researchers and students, including specialised support services and formal legal safeguards, remain underdeveloped. Awareness among universities and scholars of the threats posed by transnational repression is also low.



POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER ACTION

To uphold academic freedom against transnational repression, the Council of Europe and its member states should consider a multi-level response:



Develop the standards via Committee of Ministers Recommendations (taking into account PACE Recommendations): Define “transnational repression” consistently across international organisations, and consider definitions that include the broad range of rights impacted. Track domestic incidents and target perpetrators with diplomatic/legal measures.



Enhance legal protections: Strengthen domestic laws allowing prosecution of transnational harassment and expand academic safeguards (building on anti-SLAPP and foreign interference measures like CoE CM/Rec(2024)2).



Affirm state responsibilities: Acknowledge that transnational tactics represent a violation of a range of rights of individuals across borders, which require states to take measures to protect people on their territory.



Establish human rights-based national focal points to receive complaints, coordinate assistance and advise on risks and countermeasures.



Empower higher education institutions to develop clear protocols and confidential channels to report foreign harassment on campus, and support those affected.



Raise awareness among universities and scholars of the threats posed.



Coordinate monitoring and advocacy by elevating transnational repression in human rights forums and training programmes.



International coordination: Develop a Europe-wide incident-reporting system and publicly condemn foreign intimidation that undermines academic freedom.



CONCLUSION

Transnational repression of faculty, researchers and students is an urgent, growing, but often overlooked threat to Europe's democratic and human rights foundations.

Upholding academic freedom in the face of foreign intimidation is integral to the CoE's mission and the ideas of pluralism and free inquiry outlined in the new Democratic Pact. The CoE and Member States must act decisively to close legal gaps, protect targeted scholars, including early career researchers and students, and reaffirm that threats from abroad cannot silence scholarly inquiry and debate.

REFERENCES



➤ EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, RESOLUTION · 2023

Foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation

➤ HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH · 2024

We Will Find You': A Global Look at How Governments Repress Nationals Abroad

➤ FREEDOM HOUSE, Y. GOROKHOVSKAIA & G. VAUGHAN · 2024

Addressing Transnational Repression on Campuses in the United States

➤ PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE, RESOLUTION 2509 · 2023

Transnational repression as a growing threat to the rule of law and human rights

➤ JOURNAL OF HUMAN RIGHTS PRACTICE, CHUBB, A. & ROBERTS LYER, K. · 2024

Transnational Human Rights Violations: Addressing the Evolution of Globalized Repression through National Human Rights Institutions

➤ AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL · 2024

Open letter: The EU must address the chilling effect of China's transnational repression on freedom of expression and academic freedoms of Chinese students

➤ INSPIREUROPE+ · 2024

Briefing: Transnational Repression and Academic Freedom



➤ www.coe.int/education