ACADEMIC FREEDOM INSIGHTS SERIES

Self-censorship in academia

INTRODUCTION

Scholars serve as gatekeepers of knowledge, mediating the transmission of reliable information to the broader public about the natural and social world. When researchers practice self-censorship and refrain from sharing their findings or scientific perspectives, they impoverish both academic and public debates, hinder the free flow of information, and prevent universities and science from fulfilling their role as the "critical conscience" of society. This, in turn, undermines accountability and transparency of societies, and erodes the quality of democratic functioning. If self-censorship becomes widespread and a 'spiral of silence' develops, academic freedom may erode even in the absence of formal prohibitions, coercion, or external censorship, resulting in a self-oppressive environment.

Prepared by Council of Europe experts — Gergely Kováts and Zoltán Rónay — 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

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CONTEXT

Censorship is understood as the "repression, prohibition, and persecution of writing, writers, performance, and cultural producers by sovereign power underwritten by violence" (Moore, 2016). Censorship is generally overt and observable, most often codified in public expectations and legal regulations (Kamali, 2021).

Self-censorship, by contrast, occurs in the absence of formal or institutionalized obstacles (laws, censorship), when an individual deliberately withholds information (Bar-Tal, 2017), refrains from expressing what they think, or moderates their speech against their own preferences (Norris, 2025). Self-censorship can occur in the workplace, journalism, online spaces, family and friendship relationships, public life, as well as higher education and science (Bar-Tal et al., 2017).

In academia, self-censorship denotes the decision of scholars to refrain from pursuing or sharing their own, often controversial, ideas, or hesitating to express their professional views on contentious issues in anticipation of disagreement (Norris, 2025). In this sense, self-censorship constitutes an internally generated restriction of academic freedom.

FACTS & FIGURES

Research identifies four broad categories of motivations for self-censorship (Adamska, 2017):

01 Fear of negative consequences and sanctions – such as dismissal, reputational damage, exposure to public harassment, or social isolation.

02 Belief in futility – the perception that speaking out would not bring about meaningful change.

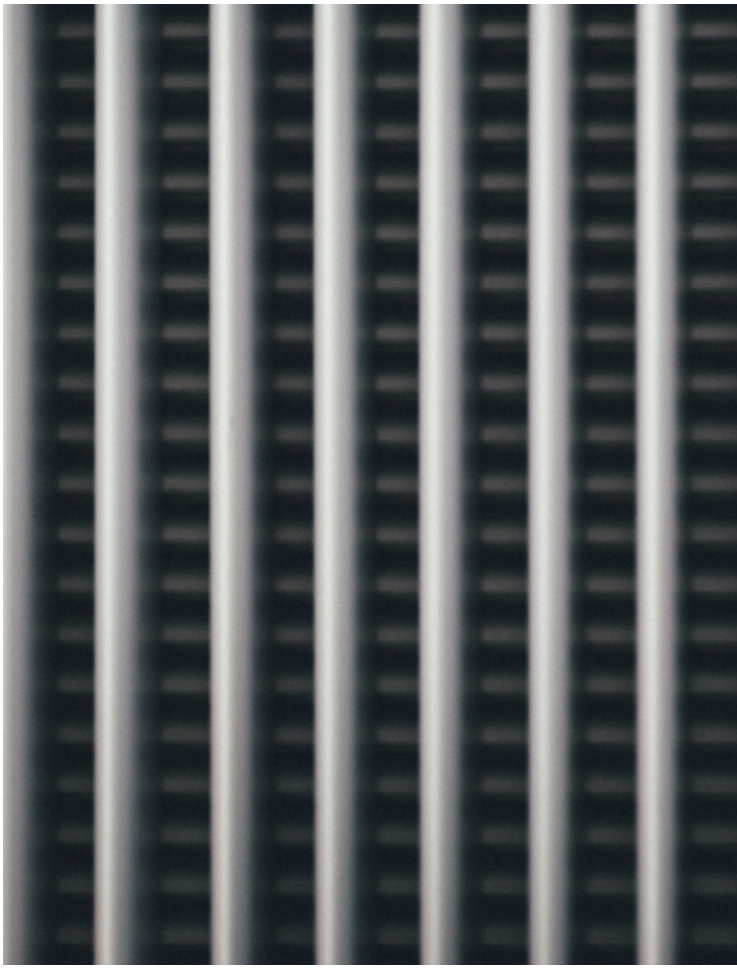
03 Prosocial motivations – such as protecting others (informants, colleagues, third parties) out of altruism; defending certain beliefs or convictions; responding to security concerns or preserving unity or institutional image – illustrating that, on occasion, self-censorship may have perceived positive effects.

04 Individual gains – avoiding extra work, or seeking to maximise personal benefit.

Empirical studies indicate that certain individual, organisational, and societal characteristics amplify the propensity to self-censor.

SOCIETAL FACTORS (BAR-TAL, 2017)

- The more authoritarian a system becomes – by restricting the free flow of information – the more individuals and academics, as gatekeepers, practice self-censorship.
- The more people feel their individual or collective security threatened (e.g., under conditions of war or siege mentality), the stronger the tendency to self-censor in order to protect the group.



ORGANISATIONAL FACTORS

- Self-censorship is less prevalent in organisations where decision-making is perceived as fair, transparent, and consistent (procedural justice), and where individuals feel treated with respect and dignity (interpersonal justice). (Adamska & Jurek, 2021)
- Conversely, loosely formulated prohibitions, subject to discretionary enforcement by leaders, increase the likelihood of self-censorship. (Roshchin, 2025)

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

- A large-scale international survey of political scientists (Norris, 2025) found that age and gender are significant predictors: early-career scholars and non-cis men are more likely to self-censor.
- Across all countries, perceptions of cancel culture were more prevalent among heterodox scholars—those holding values, beliefs, or attitudes contrary to dominant societal consensus. (Norris, 2023) In the US and several other Western countries, heterodoxy increases the likelihood of self-censorship, while in developing countries academic status and power play a greater role. (Norris, 2025)

KEY CHALLENGES & DEVELOPMENTS

Self-censorship often leads to a „spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann, 1984) within societies, universities, academic disciplines, or the academic profession. Individuals tend to remain silent if they perceive their views to be in the minority or at odds with the majority. This reduces the visibility of minority positions, while reinforcing the dominance of majority views, creating a self-perpetuating dynamic. Breaking the spiral of silence, and preventing conditions that exacerbate self-censorship, requires proactive efforts from both academic leaders and scholars.

Studying and measuring self-censorship is particularly challenging because it is a hidden phenomenon, often indistinguishable from conformity, obedience, lack of opinion, or strategic silence. Moreover, self-censorship can become unconscious: individuals may internalise prohibitions and avoidance norms, hesitate to admit their silence to others (cognitive dissonance), or rationalise it retrospectively. (Sharvit, 2017) That creates a challenge to research and monitor self-censorship.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER ACTION

Reducing self-censorship requires the establishment of formal rules, procedures, and institutional cultures that guarantee academics and students the ability to express professional opinions even when these diverge from dominant views. Recommended policy measures include:

- Strengthening the status of academic freedom at sectoral and institutional levels, ensuring that academics and students can express their professional view based on scientific procedures without sanctions or restrictions. Any potential limitations of academic freedom must be clearly and transparently regulated.
- Enhancing procedural justice by introducing impartial, transparent, and consistent decision-making frameworks at sectoral, institutional, and disciplinary levels, guaranteeing fair treatment of all academics regardless of position, status, or political/professional views.
- Institutional feedback and complaint mechanisms, ensuring fair and accessible processes for addressing grievances.
- Revising ethical and research codes to explicitly recognise political and professional pluralism, and to safeguard the expression of opinions, debate, and criticism, thereby reducing risks associated with cancel culture.
- Raising awareness of academic freedom and self-censorship among academics, students, and administrators through information campaigns and training, with particular attention to the conditions, forms and mechanisms of self-censorship.
- Developing monitoring tools (surveys, checklists, self-assessment instruments) to enable academic institutions and communities to identify the presence and risk factors of self-censorship.
- Creating mentoring systems and peer-support networks at institutional level to provide members with support and protection when engaging in academic and public debates.

CONCLUSION

Self-censorship in academia represents a subtle yet profound threat to the vitality of scholarship and the democratic role of higher education.

Unlike overt censorship, it operates invisibly, often rationalised or internalised, making it both difficult to measure and to confront. Its prevalence undermines the diversity of perspectives, fosters a spiral of silence, and erodes the critical function of science as society's conscience. The evidence shows that self-censorship is shaped by individual vulnerabilities, organizational practices, and broader political environments, meaning that reducing it requires multi-level interventions. Strengthening academic freedom, ensuring procedural and interpersonal justice, and fostering institutional cultures that value pluralism and open debate are indispensable steps. Without such measures, higher education risks drifting into a self-oppressive environment that impoverishes both scientific inquiry and democratic life.

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