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De facto Academic Freedom in the European Union – Threats and Trends

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Academic freedom is widely accepted both as a fundamental value of present-day higher education and as a prerequisite for well-functioning democratic societies. Yet, in recent years, major concerns about the state of academic freedom in Europe have been raised by higher education stakeholders, including policymakers and members of the academic community. In response to these concerns, the European Parliament launched in 2022 its Academic Freedom Forum. The studies undertaken for the Forum show that academic freedom is eroding in practically all EU Member States. In this article we will discuss these studies and, on the basis of their findings, introduce six categories of threats to academic freedom in Europe. These categories allow for more structured studies on academic freedom in Europe and can contribute to a better understanding of differences and similarities in academic freedom trends among European countries.

Introduction

Academic freedom is widely recognized as a fundamental value of present-day higher education and as a prerequisite for well-functioning democratic societies. At the same time, there is less agreement on how to define academic freedom, how to assess and monitor its current state of play and how to appropriately safeguard academic freedom against threats and violations, which appear in both traditional and new forms.

Worries about the current condition of academic freedom in Europe have led to increasing political and academic interest, as illustrated by various policy initiatives and the development of academic freedom monitors. One of the most prominent

global monitors is the Academic Freedom Index (AFI), which annually scores the level of academic freedom in 179 countries and territories around the world based on the assessment of more than 2000 country experts (Kinzelbach *et al.* 2024). While the AFI delivers methodologically sound academic freedom scores on nearly all countries in the world, it does not go into great detail when discussing possible causes for the growing threats to and violations of academic freedom. Furthermore, the AFI does not provide a valid foundation for comparing trends regarding and possible threats to academic freedom in countries with highly positive academic freedom scores, such as most EU Member States.

This article's discussion of academic freedom in Europe is based on studies undertaken since 2022 for the European Parliament's Academic Freedom Monitor (Kováts and Rónay, 2023; Maassen *et al.* 2023; Craciun *et al.* 2024). The establishment of the European Parliament (EP) Academic Freedom Monitor is an initiative of the European Parliament's Panel for the Future of Science and Technology (STOA Panel). The impetus behind this Monitor was to enhance the understanding of current academic freedom trends in Europe and discuss appropriate measures to be taken, at the European, national and institutional levels, to strengthen and promote academic freedom in the European Union. It relates to initiatives by the European Commission in relation to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA), the Bologna Follow Up Group and the Council of Europe in its work on the Democratic Mission of Higher Education.

These initiatives relate to the more general efforts in Europe to develop new geopolitical strategies that do justice to the rapidly changing global world order. According to various scholars (e.g. Haroche 2024), a key question for Europe has become: 'How do we adapt to the world?' instead of 'How does the world adapt to Europe?' In this, many stakeholders highlight the importance of fundamental values for Europe's new position in the world. In the report on the future of European competitiveness, it is argued, for example (Draghi 2024a: 1):

> Europe's fundamental values are prosperity, equity, freedom, peace and democracy in a sustainable environment. [...] If Europe can no longer provide them to its people – or has to trade off one against the other – it will have lost its reason for being.

This starting point is further elaborated with respect to research and innovation emphasizing the importance of academic freedom for Europe also in its efforts to strengthen its competitiveness (Draghi 2024b: 246):

> The EU's efforts to hone its competitive edge need to be guided by European values, which should be further reinforced by its action. These encompass fundamental values [...] but also values of specific relevance to research and innovation, such as academic freedom and independence, research integrity and ethics, transparency, diversity, inclusion, gender equality, open science and open access to scientific publications and research data. These

> values and principles should remain at the core of Europe's approach and constitute the strength of its model of excellent, collaborative research.

From this perspective it is understandable that at the European level initiatives were taken to get a better understanding of the condition of *de facto* academic freedom and to aim at developing measures for strengthening the *de jure* protection of academic freedom. They were further inspired by the conflict with respect to the Central European University starting in 2017 (Corbett and Gordon 2018) and signals from the academic community and policymakers that academic freedom was deteriorating throughout Europe. To be able to develop European geopolitical strategies that are guided by the fundamental values the Draghi report (2024a, 2024b) refers to, it is of relevance to examine whether the European initiatives have produced enhanced insights into trends in and threats to academic freedom.

Therefore, we will present and discuss the findings of the first EP studies (Maassen *et al*. 2023; Craciun *et al*. 2024). We will start by highlighting relevant academic interpretations of academic freedom before discussing the link between academic freedom and governance reforms. Next, we present the data sources and methods used for the EP studies before presenting and discussing six categories of threats to academic freedom in Europe identified on the basis of the findings of the EP studies.

Interpretations of Academic Freedom

Academic Debates on the Interpretation of Academic Freedom

Overall, it can be argued that there is no single commonly recognized and accepted definition of academic freedom. Instead, there are many scholarly and legal–political interpretations and descriptions of academic freedom, which have common elements that make it possible to study specific features of academic freedom in a valid way.

Academic freedom has traditionally been interpreted as a freedom granted to individuals who are members of the academic profession (UNESCO 1997, 2017; AAUP 2015a, 2015b). More recently, academic freedom is interpreted as also applying to higher education students and administrative staff (EHEA 2020, 2024; Vrielink *et al*. 2010). In both the narrow and broad interpretation, academic freedom does not exist in a vacuum, but within a specific institutional setting, that is, 'the University' (Beaud 2022) or, more generally, an institutional setting comprising higher education institutions as well as research institutes and units (public and private). In this understanding, these institutions rely on public authorities to provide legal frameworks that acknowledge the importance and protection of academic freedom, although without defining academic freedom too narrowly. This in turn enables the institutions to protect the members of the academic community, including – where and when appropriate – students and non-academic staff.

Furthermore, the foundational argument for emphasizing that the responsibility for guarding academic freedom should rest with the academic community is that this provides the best guarantee that the principles of academic freedom will be respected

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by all relevant stakeholders. Moreover, the academic community can be expected to adhere more directly and effectively to the responsibilities and obligations that accompany academic freedom, such as respecting research integrity, than any external body or actor. The connection between the academic freedom of individual academics and other members of the academic community and the institutional setting is crucial (Beaud 2022: 213). This implies, for example, that the idea of 'the University' (Olsen 2007) is meaningless without academic freedom (Jaspers and Rossman 1961), while at the same time there is no other space in society outside the institutional setting where academic freedom can be exercised in a meaningful way.

The emergence of the research university model in Germany in the early 1800s, highlighting the concepts of *Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit*, has strongly contributed to the central position of academic freedom in academia (Metzger 1978). Beaud (2022: 208) argued:

> Academic freedom is an Invention of the Modernity, as it presupposes freedom of thought and thus the rejection of any truth dogmatically imposed by the authorities as guardians of learning. In other words, academic freedom is based principally on the freedom to search for truth, independently of all existing dogma, and it necessarily implies freedom of research.

From this perspective, academic freedom is essential for achieving high-quality education and research, because it enhances the capacity of scholars and students to acquire, generate and apply knowledge in ways that are essential for their societies.

This interpretation of academic freedom has been extended to include other values and conditions required to safeguard academic freedom, such as staff and student expressions on university governance and policy matters, labour conditions of academic staff, the financial freedom required to follow one's scholarly curiosity and the appropriate democratic institutional governance structures and practices that allow for effective self-governance of academic and institutional affairs (see, for example, Beiter *et al*. 2016). In recent debates, the question regarding the relationship between academic freedom and institutional autonomy has come up regularly. In the extended interpretations of academic freedom, institutional autonomy is most generally regarded as constitutive for academic freedom (EHEA 2020: 2; see also EHEA 2024).

The argument is that once an appropriate legal frame for the protection of academic freedom is in place, the state should give higher education institutions and research institutes sufficient room to manoeuvre for enacting the promotion and protection of academic freedom as part of their institutional autonomy. Some interpretations even see institutional autonomy as an organizational dimension integrated with individual academic freedom (Beiter *et al*. 2016), instead of being a feature of public administration, that is, the formal division of governance responsibilities between public authorities and public-sector organizations, such as higher education institutions. For example, an interpretation from the Court of Justice of the European Union states (2020: 34):

> Academic freedom did not only have an individual dimension in so far as it is associated with freedom of expression and, specifically in the field of research, the freedoms of communication, of research and of dissemination of results thus obtained, but also an institutional and organisational dimension reflected in the autonomy of those institutions.

Furthermore, it is generally acknowledged that academic freedom is not an absolute freedom, implying that there are legitimate limitations to academic freedom (see, for example, Axelrod 2017; Vrielink *et al*. 2010). A straightforward example concerns the fiscal framework conditions, namely that no government can be expected to publicly fund all research activities that the academic staff of universities, colleges and research institutes would like to undertake. In more general terms, the purpose and nature of these legitimate limitations can be identified as follows: when it comes to the purpose of limitations, first we can identify limitations justified internally, that is, justified by the academic activity's own purpose and own basic norms, including research integrity. Second, there are limitations justified externally, that is, they are justified by the idea that research and teaching have interfaces with non-academic activities and actors, and under specific circumstances external framework conditions can directly or indirectly limit academic freedom legitimately in these interfaces.

Academic Freedom and Governmental Reforms

As part of the democratization of Europe and other parts of the world during the second half of the twentieth century, academic freedom has developed from being a relatively abstract norm to becoming a legally acknowledged and protected principle (see, for example, UNESCO 1997, 2017; AAUP 2015a, 2015b). This codification of academic freedom started at a time when higher education was still a rather small and relatively self-standing part of society. Consequently, higher education was a marginal policy area, which made it possible for public authorities to allow it to function and operate on the basis of the principle of self-governance. In this situation, the formal *de jure* protection of academic freedom contributed to it being taken for granted as part of the social contract (or pact) between higher education and society (Gornitzka *et al*. 2007). At the same time, while in most countries around the world academic freedom was legally protected, it remained a concept that lacked a globally agreed upon definition. In addition, the exercise of academic freedom in practice was complex, and the potential and real threats and violations to the *de facto* exercise of academic freedom were in general poorly understood (Karran 2009).

The academic reforms introduced in European countries since the late 1980s reflected the growing integration of higher education and research with other policy areas and the political focus on the need to enhance the responsiveness of higher education and research to meet societies' needs (Gornitzka *et al*. 2007). These reforms focused especially on the governance, organization and funding of higher education institutions, and less on basic values and principles central to the mission

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of higher education, such as academic freedom (Jungblut *et al.* 2023). Furthermore, there were few serious discussions of how a commitment to purely external political goals and expectations with respect to higher education and research can be squared with academic values and principles, as incorporated in academic freedom (Olsen and Maassen 2007: 9).

Even though there were national variations among European countries in reform instrumentalization and implementation, the reform ideas nonetheless aimed at realizing comparable changes. In the implementation of these ideas, enhancing institutional autonomy was an important policy intention (Maassen *et al.* 2017; Capano and Jarvis 2020; Capano and Pritoni 2020; Maltais *et al.* 2023). In the reform agendas, institutional autonomy was predominantly interpreted from the perspective of the effective distribution of responsibilities between public authorities and higher education. The universities and colleges should have more institutional autonomy and, at the same time, be more accountable for how they used their enhanced autonomy. This required new institutional governance structures based on strategic priorities and the executive management of human resources, infrastructures, investments and administrative procedures.

In this, institutional autonomy became decoupled from academic freedom but was rather seen as an instrumental approach to incorporating New Public Management approaches in higher education governance (Maassen 2017; Capano and Jarvis 2020). Instead of presenting visions of how basic values and principles could be integrated into more effective governance and organizational structures, quality assessment of education and research, and new funding arrangements, institutional autonomy was linked to executive leadership and management, accountability, strategic organizational actorhood (Krücken and Meier 2006), universities becoming more complete organizations (Seeber *et al.* Seeber, 2015) and growing competition for funding, students, staff and reputation (Jongbloed and Vossensteyn 2010; Musselin 2018).

The impacts of these reforms have gradually brought a number of worries to the fore about the position of values and principles, including academic freedom, in the reformed academic systems and institutions. The reforms' emphasis on performance and responsiveness of higher education institutions, the professionalization of university leadership and management, the institutions' contributions to economic competitiveness and innovation, and more recently the geopolitical role of knowledge, have inspired various activities and debates in academia and the wider society. These include public statements, open letters from the academic community to public authorities and a growing number of academic projects, studies and publications addressing *de facto* threats to academic freedom in European countries, as interpreted and experienced by institutional leaders, as well as academics and students and their representative bodies. These statements, letters, policy briefs and the like, are addressing multiple factors that are underlying threats to academic freedom, and which are argued to be much more complex than in the past. In this, they have formed an essential foundation for the European Parliament's decision to

launch the Academic Freedom Monitor and the annual studies presented in this article (Panel for the Future of Science and Technology (STOA), n.d.).

Methodology and Data Sources

Two studies on *de facto* academic freedom in the EU are the basis for this article. The first (Maassen *et al*. 2023) is a pilot study covering all 27 EU Member States, and the second (Craciun *et al*. 2024) is a trend analysis of ten selected EU Member States. The countries were selected to cover a range of positions in existing academic freedom indices and to represent a diverse set of EU Member States.

To study academic freedom, various data types and sources can be used. Spannagel (2020) has distinguished five main data types available for the examination of academic freedom: (1) expert assessments, (2) opinions and lived experiences, (3) events data, (4) institutional self-assessments, and (5) de jure assessments. Spannagel's review provides a highly relevant overview for any researcher on academic freedom, both when it comes to the strengths and limitations of data types and the pitfalls researchers might face in collecting their own data.

The data collected for the studies that underpin this article can be regarded as events data. However, data were not collected by using reports on actual academic freedom infringements, but by examining public media and academic literature reporting on debates or discussions on academic freedom in the respective countries. The advantage of using events data is their illustrative character. It is rather easy to comprehend how the information on the debates is obtained as they happen in the public arena, and what they therefore represent. Moreover, by using media reports we ensure that debates have reached a certain level of visibility or prominence (enough to be represented in the media) before they are included. A second benefit is event data's unique timeliness, as debates on academic freedom are usually reported almost in real time and can therefore indicate the emergence of specific worries on the development of academic freedom in practice.

Besides collecting events data for all 27 EU countries for the initial study, as well as revisiting and updating the events data for the ten countries of the trends analysis, the authors also collected feedback from two to four national experts for the ten countries of the trends analysis through short interviews based on initial drafts of each country report. The findings were further discussed with an Academic Board of experts and a Sounding Board of stakeholder organizations who focused on the overarching European dynamics of the results.

Our methodological approach has certain trade-offs. The existence and tone of national debates is inherently linked to the general cultural and socio-economic context of the country. The quantitative existence of 'many' debates concerning academic freedom can therefore not be seen as an indicator per se of general deterioration of academic freedom in a particular country. The occurrence of many debates can also be an indication of a healthy climate where the scope and limits of academic freedom are continuously debated in open and constructive settings and,

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despite the emergence of certain threats, important safeguards and measures to protect academic freedom could be in place. Similarly, a lack of cases could also mean that academic staff who may be subject to violations of academic freedom either see no point in public debate, as it would not likely lead to improvement, or do not manage to get the necessary attention for their problems in the media.

From that perspective it must be stressed that the methodology used in the EP studies is not suitable for making a comprehensive diagnosis of all aspects of academic freedom in the EU. However, this is also not the intention of these studies. The methodology functions as a means to identify key debates and gaps where more scholarly and political attention is warranted. By exploring trends in EU Member States, who are generally perceived to have high levels of academic freedom and who rank among the top positions in global academic freedom rankings, the studies provide an overview of areas where debates are ongoing, areas where specific threats or violations are being identified, and how such cases are addressed and, if applicable, solved, and whether principles of academic freedom have been upheld according to the reports.

Furthermore, the methodology allows for the mapping and clustering of debates linked to threats to academic freedom across the EU and thereby provides a more structured analytical approach to the main sources of threats to academic freedom. An overview of some of the main findings of the studies is presented in the next section.

Main Sources of Threats to Academic Freedom in the EU Member States

The results from the studies undertaken for the EP (Maassen *et al.* 2023; Craciun *et al.* 2024) have been used to identify the main sources for threats to academic freedom in the EU Member States. By mapping, clustering and analysing the EP studies' findings on academic freedom trends across the EU, and through input and feedback from consulted experts, we have categorized the factors underlying the threats to and violations of academic freedom in the EU in the following way. We argue that this categorization provides a structured analytical approach to the study of academic freedom trends in the EU Member States.

Government and Politics

This category refers to the ways in which political actors, i.e., public authorities and their agencies and individual politicians, such as members of parliament, and their parties, affect or want to affect the state of academic freedom in their country in such a way that it unduly limits the possibilities of academics and students to optimally exercise their academic freedom.

Undue political interference in academic freedom falls into two overall patterns. The first concerns direct interference of government in academic freedom, for

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example, by questioning the scientific nature of one or more academic fields, i.e., the research conducted and study programmes within these fields. This interference is not based on the academic productivity of the field(s) in question, but in essence is linked to the political ideology of the government. The clearest example is Hungary, where the government has revoked the state recognition of gender studies programmes despite its accreditation of these programmes. Furthermore, it is also affecting basic research conditions negatively, for example, by interfering in the decision making on which research proposals should be selected for public funding and by making access to data for research on government-controlled sectors, such as health care and the prison system, increasingly difficult.

Another case is Romania, where the government announced its plan to impose a ban on curricular and extra-curricular activities based on gender-critical theories. The announced ban on gender studies did not materialize, because it was deemed unconstitutional by the constitutional court. Therefore, unlike the situation in Hungary, in the case of Romania the worries about the condition of academic freedom are, until now, more about increasing threats of government interference than about structural governmental violations of academic freedom.

The second pattern concerns the proposals of public authorities or specific political parties or politicians, who often are not part of the government, to change the conditions under which academic freedom is to be exercised. This includes proposals to shift control over the guarding of academic freedom from within to outside academia. In these cases, which include Austria, Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands, the interference of political actors with the academic responsibility for guarding academic freedom is inspired by a specific political agenda. For example, in Denmark, Parliament has discussed a proposal to establish a national body to monitor 'questionable' research, implying a transfer of the responsibility for guarding academic freedom from academia to the public authorities. Even though the threat did not materialize, the politicians involved indicated that it still might be necessary in the future to shift responsibility for guarding academic freedom away from the academic community (Maassen *et al*. 2023).

Another example is threats to institutional autonomy. While, institutional autonomy is obviously not static, the EP studies show that the level of institutional autonomy is in many cases an issue of contestation. This is caused, for example, by new sector laws that are argued to give the government the opportunity to interfere in institutional affairs, for example, through the political appointment of institutional leaders, or the establishment of a politically controlled internal or external management body. In the EP studies, concerns about institutional autonomy as a consequence of government interference in institutional affairs have been clearly identified in Hungary. But also in other EU Member States, such as Croatia, Denmark, Greece, Ireland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, there are worries about the possible impacts on academic freedom of proposed or materialized legal changes in the governance relationships between the government and the universities, which strengthen the opportunities of the government to interfere in institutional matters. At the same time, in a number of cases, it has been argued by some of the

stakeholders involved that one or more actors who criticized the proposed legislation did so not because of its negative impact on institutional autonomy, but in order to move attention away from another issue, for example, accusations of corruption (Maassen *et al*. 2023).

Institutional Leadership and Management

This category concerns the ways in which the leadership and management of higher education institutions affect, or want to affect, academic freedom in their institution with the potential to unduly limit the possibilities of academics and students to exercise their academic freedom. Institutional leadership and management include both formal academic institutional leaders, such as presidents, rectors, vice-chancellors and deans, as well as institutional administrative leaders/managers, such as heads of administrative offices, and administrative procedures and routines.

The EP studies show that in many countries more executive forms of institutional leadership and management have been introduced in higher education, which has led to growing worries about the ways in which the new leadership affects academic freedom within its institution. These worries concern violations of academic freedom, e.g., by imposing undue limits to the academic freedom of expression of its staff, or changes in the conditions for academic freedom, for example, by altering self-governance practices or academic labour conditions. The EP studies show that threats to academic freedom by the institutional leadership and management have emerged in several countries, including Denmark, France, the Netherlands and Sweden. For example, in Denmark, many academics and students are arguing that the executive institutional leadership that emerged as a consequence of the implementation of the 2003 University Autonomy Law is responsible for various threats to and (possible) violations of academic freedom. These include the limitation of self-governance, the suggestion that tenured university staff have, in some institutions, lost their jobs because they were critical of their leadership, and allowing for a growing influence of external economic and political interests (Craciun *et al*. 2024).

The Academic Community

This category refers to the ways in which members of the academic staff and students affect the state of academic freedom in their institution, or in higher education in general, in such a way that it potentially limits the possibilities of other academics and students to exercise their academic freedom.

Internal academic debates, disagreements, tensions and conflicts in themselves do not form a threat to academic freedom, and clashes of ideas are inherent to scholarly endeavours. However, there are also instances where academic interactions become of a kind that render open academic debate impossible, and thereby can become a constraint on academic freedom. This is the case, for example, when specific research themes or lecture topics addressed by certain academics are labelled as unscientific and therefore unacceptable by other academics and/or students. Worries that this

might develop into a more structural problem have increased since internal academic debates have become more polarized. The EP studies show that in some countries attempts to silence specific strands of research, teaching or academic expression are in some cases initiated by academic staff and/or students (Craciun *et al*. 2024).

In this, it is important to mention that the coverage of such internal academic conflicts might be imbalanced – and intense debates concerning single cases in some countries do not necessarily mean that this would not be an issue in other countries (albeit in different versions). Nor does it mean that a heated debate in a few cases indicates that this is a systemic threat to or a violation of academic freedom. Not least, this is a category where there is no clear-cut boundary as to when academic debates, disagreements, tensions and conflicts might represent threats to or violations of academic freedom. While the EP studies point towards certain debates and potential incidents, for example, in Austria and France, this is an area where the interpretation of boundaries of academic freedom, empirical data and a systematic knowledge basis need to be further improved (Craciun *et al*. 2024).

Civil Society

This category covers the ways in which individual citizens or groups of citizens affect, or want to affect, the condition of academic freedom in their country (and sometimes beyond) in ways that limit the ability of academics and students to exercise it. The use of social media can play a key role in this category.

In this, we can refer to the importance of the traditional pact between higher education and society (Gornitzka *et al*. 2007), which provided stability, was based on mutual trust and incorporated relatively clear roles for both society and the university. This pact has lost its vigour, and higher education and society are looking for a new mutually acceptable compact. In the meantime, the roles of higher education and science in society are no longer as uncontested as before. Academic expertise is no longer 'automatically' legitimate, and individual academics are attacked, especially through social media, for the academic work they are disseminating or for the role they are playing as academic experts in public-policy processes.

This includes their participation in public debates; their presentations of specific scientific perspectives, for example, on climate change or vaccinations; their representations of certain political, social or cultural perspectives, for example, linked to identity issues; and their involvement in providing scientific knowledge to be used in political decision making. The latter was, for example, the case when academics involved in public debates on the Covid-19 pandemic and the introduction of Covid-19 measures, were attacked on social media in such a way that many of them either withdrew from their expert role, or even from Covid-19-related academic work. This was the case, amongst other countries, in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden (Maassen *et al*. 2023).

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Private Sector

This category focuses on the ways in which private companies and organizations, such as foundations, affect or want to affect the state of academic freedom in their country (and sometimes beyond) in such a way that it limits the ability of academics and students to exercise it. The use of both legal and financial instruments plays a key role in this category.

The possible impact of private-sector actors on academic freedom is discussed in several EU Member States. A key element in this concerns the role of private funding, especially of research. To maintain research activities with decreasing levels of public funding, researchers need to obtain a higher degree of funding from private sources. While this can lead to productive collaborations between academia and the private sector and is not a problem per se, the EP studies show worrying cases of undue interference of private funders in the research problems to be addressed, the results to be produced, and the academic publications that are allowed. In addition, there are various conflicts about the ownership of the knowledge produced in privately funded academic research.

The EP studies show, for example in Denmark, a threat from the private sector to academic freedom through legal cases aimed at preventing 'unwanted research results' being published, or critical scientifically based opinions publicly presented by academics. Furthermore, we can point to the use of SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) by private sector companies against critical academics, e.g., in France, where measures were recommended to reduce the threat of SLAPPs that have not yet been implemented (Maassen *et al.* 2023). In addition, in other EU Member States, e.g., Germany, Malta and the Netherlands, there are worries about the impact of the growing involvement of the private sector in funding scientific research on academic freedom (Craciun *et al.* 2024).

Security Policies

This is identified as a separate category on the basis of the findings of the 2024 EP studies (Craciun *et al.* 2024) that show the rapid emergence of European and national security policies as a consequence of growing geopolitical tensions and conflicts. These concerns and policies increasingly affect or threaten to affect academic freedom. This concerns research, education and academic expression, as well as the conditions under which academic freedom is to be exercised, and is often linked to countering foreign interference, espionage or other security threats in the context of growing global competition among states. In practice, security worries and policies form the foundation for new, more explicit science diplomacy approaches, new research-funding mechanisms, new framework conditions for the internationalization of higher education and restrictions to the dissemination and sharing of scientific knowledge. All of these have a potential impact on academic freedom, and the EP studies show that we are at a beginning of a process in which the main stakeholders involved are trying to develop an appropriate, new balance between the fundamental

values of academia, including academic freedom, and national as well as European security interests.

Conclusions

The results from the EP Academic Freedom Monitor show that academic freedom is eroding in practically all EU Member States. While systemic and structural infringements of academic freedom have only taken place in Hungary, various threats to academic freedom are increasingly being identified and discussed in other EU Member States. These threats are argued to come from different sources at the same time. The six categories of threats to academic freedom presented in the previous section allow us to develop a better understanding of the nature of these sources.

Furthermore, the categories also make it possible to make comparisons among European countries when it comes to the differences and similarities in academic freedom trends and the main threats to academic freedom. For example, the impact of institutional leadership and management on academic freedom is different in Western European countries that underwent university governance reforms in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, such as Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden, compared with Central and Eastern European countries where university governance reforms are more recent.

Another example concerns the impact of the private sector on academic freedom. There are important variations among European countries when it comes to the level of public funding of higher education and research, the nature of the private sector, the role of private foundations in funding academic research and the traditions in private–public science collaboration. There are also important differences across European countries when it comes to the nature of the threats to academic freedom in the other four categories.

The studies for the EP Academic Freedom Monitor show that the worries about the state of academic freedom are justified. However, for developing appropriate measures to counter this development, the knowledge base with respect to the main academic freedom trends and threats needs to be further strengthened. This is addressed in the set of possible policy options proposed on the basis of the EP studies. The aim of these policy options is to prevent the further erosion of academic freedom in Europe, improve its de jure protection and raise awareness of the importance of academic freedom within the academic community and society as a whole. The proposed policy options include setting up a European Platform for Academic Freedom; integrating academic freedom more effectively and consistently into EU higher education, research, development and innovation programmes; and establishing a European clearinghouse for the meta-analysis of existing academic freedom studies and data (Craciun *et al.* 2024: 8–12). For the successful further development and implementation of these policy options both at the European and the national level, the input of the academic community is crucial.

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