Leibniz Association

Policy Brief

Academic Freedom in East Central Europe: Worrying Trends and Required Actions

By the Leibniz Research Network Central and Eastern Europe

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Summary

Academic freedom is a fundamental value recognised by the EU in Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union: "*Freedom of the arts and sciences. The arts and scientific research shall be free of constraint. Academic freedom shall be respected*." However, the current trend in many countries of Europe is worrying. Hungary, for example, ranks at the bottom 20-30% of countries worldwide when it comes to academic freedom. In most accession countries, academic freedom is in an increasingly precarious state. Deliberate misinformation strategies capitalize on public distrust to delegitimize scientific expertise. This further aggravates the problem, as many voters do not see academic freedom as an important value at all.

The European Union, therefore, needs to take a more proactive approach to promote and defend this core principle. Creativity and critical reflection are crucial for innovative, resilient, forward-looking European societies and can flourish only under conditions of free research and teaching. This means systematically strengthening the framework conditions that guarantee the core dimensions of academic freedom. The planned European Research Area (ERA) Act presents a unique opportunity to translate these principles into concrete legislative action. By embedding robust academic freedom protections within the ERA framework, the EU can establish binding standards that shield scientific institutions from external interference and disinformation campaigns. Such legislative measures would not only strengthen Europe's research capacity but also restore public confidence in scientific expertise.

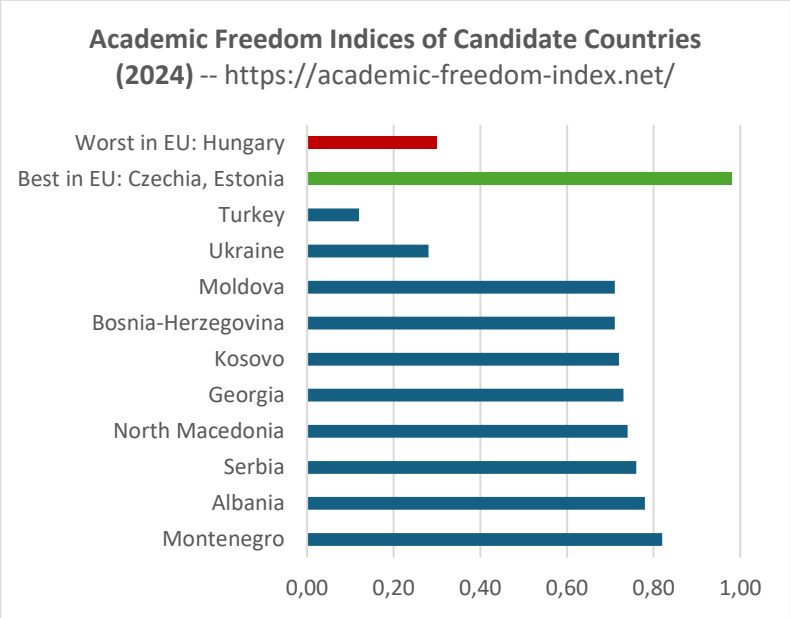
The Problem

The Draghi report (2024) stressed academic freedom as one of the fundamental values which are crucial for maintaining Europe's strategic position and competitiveness in the world. However, key indicators point to a decline of academic freedom in several member states (as well as in other democracies, such as the United States). Countries in East Central Europe are particularly affected, both among Member States and among accession countries. This erosion of academic freedom not only undermines research integrity, but also weakens these countries' ability to participate effectively in the European Research Area (ERA) and contribute to evidence-based policymaking, thereby compromising the overall strength and coherence of the ERA. Conversely, their participation in the ERA makes questions of academic freedom a practical matter of European concern. The EU, therefore, needs to support efforts to maintain or even create adequate institutional and legal conditions, and to strengthen the resilience and autonomy of academic institutions, so that the ideal of academic freedom can materialize.

The main sources of infringements of academic freedom in Eastern Europe today are:

- Inappropriate interference and pressure from the government or politicians
- attacks by societal actors and the media, especially on social media
- problems of institutional leadership and management
- self-censorship and the silencing of critical voices from the academic community

While within the EU infringements of academic freedom have reached a systematic and structural level only in Hungary, there have been worrying signals in other countries as well, such as the cancelling of events questioning national narratives in Bulgaria, the overall politicization of academic institutions under the previous Polish government, or strong political and societal pressure against the accreditation of gender studies in Croatia.



The fundamental dimensions of academic freedom are clear: freedom to conduct research, to teach and to learn, and academic freedom of expression. However, the implementation of these values depends on structural conditions that go beyond constitutional guarantees. For this reason, EU measures to strengthen academic freedom must follow a comprehensive approach. Such measures must address specific structural problems in Eastern Europe:

- Inadequate and sometimes uncertain institutional funding
- Significant brain-drain of scientists
- Weak legal protection of academic freedom

A comprehensive approach to academic freedom also takes into account the qualitative dimensions of research and teaching: only an academia that promotes diversity across disciplines and allows for criticism and questioning of the conventional mainstream is truly free. The EU's research policy must guarantee this diversity of opinion. Researchers should be encouraged to engage in dialogue with the public to strengthen trust in scientific findings and discuss different perspectives.

What Can Be Done?

- Clear definition of academic freedom at European level
- Systematic monitoring addressing the issues listed above, for example through the establishment of a European observatory
- Formalization of academic freedom as a condition for accession
- Strengthening institutional resilience through autonomy and adequate funding, to be reflected in Horizon Europe (e.g. through WIDERA)
- Fostering collaboration to build communities that are resilient to political or administrative pressure

- Promoting epistemological diversity through EU and national funding programs as a crucial pillar of Open Science
- Providing funding for scholars/institutions committed to excellence and academic freedom in countries where governments restrict freedom (e.g. through international partnerships and investing in Science Diplomacy)

Sources

Academic Freedom Index, Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen, https://academic-freedom-index.net/

European Parliament, *Academic Freedom Monitor 2024*. *Analysis of de facto state of academic freedom in the EU.* *https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_STU(2025)765775*

Leibniz Research Network Central and Eastern Europe

The Leibniz Research Network on Central and Eastern Europe is a collaborative platform of the Leibniz Association (Germany) established in 2015, bringing together over twenty Leibniz institutes to foster interdisciplinary research on the region. The network serves as Germany's largest non-university academic expertise hub for Central and Eastern Europe, promoting dialogue, exchange, joint projects, and public policy engagement. Its work addresses current challenges such as restrictions on academic freedom and the war in Ukraine, with a focus on disseminating knowledge to the wider public.

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