

Defending and promoting academic freedom.

**A global issue, an urgent matter for
France and Europe.**

Findings and proposals for action

Report for France Universités

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“Defending not established truths but the idea of free research”
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, In *Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays* (1953).

“The essentiality of freedom in the community of American universities is almost self-evident. No one should underestimate the vital role in a democracy that is played by those who guide and train our youth. To impose any strait jacket upon the intellectual leaders in our colleges and universities would imperil the future of our Nation”,
Chief Justice Earl Warren (1957).

“The purpose of this constant lie is not to make people believe a lie, but to ensure that no one believes anything anymore. A people that can no longer distinguish truth from lies cannot distinguish good from evil. And such a people, deprived of the power to think and judge, is, without knowing it and without wanting it, completely subject to the rule of lies. With such a people, you can do whatever you want”
Hannah Arendt, *Interview with Roger Errera on the question of totalitarianism* (1974).

“As they create and disseminate knowledge, universities question dogmas and established doctrines and encourage critical thinking in all students and scholars. Academic freedom is their lifeblood; open enquiry and dialogue their nourishment”.
Magna Charta Universitatum, signed by close to 400 European rectors in Bologna on September 18, 1988, on the 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna.

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Foreword

Considering the drastic decline in academic freedom around the world, this report places the French case in a comparative perspective and proposes concrete measures to defend and strengthen its scope. This work strives to reflect the diversity of viewpoints and to foster dialogue between them, particularly when they prove to be antagonistic. In a context where academic freedom has become a highly controversial issue, the reception of this work in France will be an indicator of how far along we are and how much energy will need to be mobilized to improve the situation. This report seeks to bring together a substantial body of recent reflections, opinion pieces, debates, initiatives, and legislation (international, European, and French) on academic freedom. The bibliography, which appears in the annexes, aims to reflect the complexity and intensity of the controversies surrounding academic freedom today, both in academia and in the public sphere¹.

The measured tone of this report is due to a requirement for rigor and is not a form of wariness. The gravity of the situation remains unchanged.

We set out the guiding principles and key ideas underlying this report and trace the multiple origins of the concept of academic freedom and the major issues it covers. We then provide an overview of its status around the world, in Europe and in France, based on available indicators. The last section is devoted to concrete recommendations aimed at strengthening its protection at all possible levels.

It should be noted from the outset that academic freedom is conceived in the singular, much like freedom of expression or freedom of the press. Academic freedom, the result of a relatively recent history, is a fundamental right recognized for all higher education and research personnel. It guarantees them the freedom to think, teach, conduct research, publish, and debate, free from political, ideological, or economic interference. Academic freedom guarantees the free circulation and excellence of knowledge, in accordance with scientific standards defined by peers. It is exercised both individually and collectively through sound ethical principles and democratic university governance. Academic freedom is a professional right whose exercise benefits all citizens within a state governed by the rule of law.

¹ These contributions, duly listed in the attached bibliography, are intended to constitute a reference document, which will be expanded as developments on the subject unfold. As comprehensive as possible, but necessarily incomplete, this bibliography does not claim to be exhaustive. We therefore ask those whose work or actions are not included to kindly excuse these omissions, which in no way reflect on their importance.

I. Summary

This report assumes that the changes observed in academic freedom outside our borders will sooner or later have similar effects within our own scientific ecosystem.

5. A global dynamic with systemic effects: what about France?

It would be misleading, even irresponsible, to consider the rise of illiberal tendencies targeting science, under the influence of authoritarian regimes and/or contemporary populist movements, as a merely sporadic and localized phenomenon. These developments are in fact part of global structural dynamics, fueled by closely interdependent economic, political, and technological factors. Moreover, scientific communities are destined to evolve in deeply interconnected spaces, where norms governing academic life are continually redefined by advances in knowledge as well as by the practices of other colleagues, immersed in diverse political realities. Thus, Chinese-style scientific techno-nationalism, alongside the anti-science and post-truth currents of the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement, two extreme yet illustrative cases, are emerging even within some of the most internationalized research ecosystems in the world. While these trends are currently contested across Europe, they are increasingly finding resonance, sometimes in unexpected ways. In any case, they revive a longstanding tension: a fascination with, yet simultaneous aversion toward, intellectual elites and autonomous forms of knowledge production.

In France, this dynamic is particularly, but not exclusively, linked to the Poujadist movement heritage. In this filiation academics are sometimes perceived as insufficiently aligned with the objectives of the State and therefore too subversive. They are sometimes criticized for their supposed uselessness, considered even more unacceptable because it is deemed to be costly to the community.

In this report, the French context is systematically placed in a comparative perspective, attentive to the diversity of national situations as well as disciplinary cultures: from the experimental sciences to the humanities and social sciences. This approach allows us to take a step back from the French case by comparing it with other international academic realities and identify avenues for reflection, institutional innovations, or best practices that could be adapted.

Furthermore, unlike other areas relating to fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of the press or the right to voluntary termination of pregnancy, in which France has historically been a pioneer, it lags significantly behind in this area. When it comes to academic freedom, France doesn't have a deeply rooted political, professional, or civic culture. The existing legal safeguards are still new, incomplete, and, in the eyes of many observers, fragile. Moreover, the current Trumpian moment clearly demonstrates that the constitutional democracy framework, however well-established, is no longer sufficient on its own to ensure the effective protection of scientific freedom. This is all the truer given that private funding for research now often considerably exceeds public funding.

The pressures currently exerted on universities, affecting both liberal scientific powers and authoritarian regimes, call for lucid analysis and coordinated responses. It would be deceptive to believe that the European scientific ecosystem and in particular the French ecosystem could withstand the multiple forms of attack on universities in the long term without substantially strengthening its protection and monitoring instruments. This work focuses on formulating detailed recommendations aimed at preserving, in a sustainable manner, what constitutes the

most valuable professional asset of those involved in higher education and research, and one of the pillars of democratic society.

In a context where academic freedom remains misunderstood, frequently reduced to vague definitions and, more seriously, targeted by certain deliberately hostile campaigns, this work is intended as a reflection conveyed by the very heart of the academic community. This undertaking reflects a desire for empowerment, in the full sense of the term: to take back the initiative in the discourse and reflection on issues related to academic freedom. In doing so, we wish to contribute as teachers and researchers to this unique and fundamental freedom by drawing on empirical data and using analytical methods as we would for any other subject of study. The proposals put forward in this report in no way constitute a departure from the principle of institutional restraint but rather exemplify its consistent application. As attacks on academic freedom threaten the very nature of the university and its role in serving the common good, it is incumbent upon the university to resist pressures that seek to undermine it.

This action is essential to its own survival as well as to the survival of knowledge and democracy, and for the benefit of all citizens. It is therefore up to academics to assume their dual intellectual and civic responsibility by reestablishing a demanding and fruitful dialogue, both within the university and with the institutions and civil society from which they come².

The context in which this work was carried out has become significantly more difficult at the global and national levels. In the space of a few months in 2025, the situation of academic freedom has deteriorated significantly at the international level, to the point where it is reasonable to anticipate a worsening of this trend in the coming years, given that the dynamics at work are systemic in nature. It is however possible that greater attention will now be paid to these issues, paradoxically, thanks to the unprecedented situation observed specifically in the United States of America.

The past decade has seen a major reconfiguration of the global balance of power, characterized by a simultaneous weakening of peace, democracy, and academic autonomy, but also by a significant strengthening of scientific and technological capabilities in a growing number of countries, as illustrated by the maps developed for this report. Three structural trends emerge: first, the acceleration of conflict and brutality in the international arena, from the annexation of Crimea to the invasion of Ukraine, the wars in the Middle East, the breakdown of UN multilateralism, and the growing militarization of regional spaces; secondly, the tension between, on the one hand, the questioning of established constitutional states, marked by the rise of populism and authoritarianism, and, on the other hand, the struggle to establish or restore democratic regimes, as evidenced by the Arab Spring and the protests in Hong Kong; finally, the emergence of disruptive technologies (artificial intelligence [AI], biotechnology, quantum computing), which embody a marker of power and therefore tend to define, for public authorities, what science should become.

The long Covid-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst, accelerating these changes. During this period, we have had to teach via Zoom, exposing our students, ourselves, and the content of our courses to espionage and/or comments from individuals, political groups, and freedom-destroying social networks. A more intrusive and systematic political instrumentalization than ever before has resulted, affecting all aspects of university life: teaching and research first and

² Cécile Laborde, “*Retour sur le positionnement politique des universités*”, April 2025, joint CEE-CEVIPOF seminar Sciences Po, Paris and in AOC, October 2024 : <https://aoc.media/analyse/2024/10/22/sur-le-positionnement-politique-des-universites/>

foremost, but also student life in all its dimensions of social and political engagement. The rise in criticism of the alleged “wokeness” of many European universities, supported by powerful influence peddlers from certain media outlets and political groups, has contributed to undermining academic freedom. Furthermore, a series of protests that relate more to freedom of expression in the university context than to academic freedom *per se* have contributed to blurring the distinction between these two fundamental principles and, in doing so, to undermining academic institutions. In the United States, for example, students and professors have been involved in the Black Lives Matter movement, which began in 2013 and was reignited with renewed intensity following the murder of George Floyd in 2020³. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 sparked an unprecedented mobilization, marked by the adoption of scientific sanctions on Russia at the European level. On the initiative of these measures, most of the French higher education and research institutions suspended or even severed their institutional cooperation with Russian partners, also in response to the publication of a statement signed by a collective of Russian university rectors expressing their support for Vladimir Putin. This move, which consisted in aligning research policies with science diplomacy guidelines, may have then appeared entirely legitimate. However, some voices arose to highlight the lack of in-depth consultation with the academic community prior to the implementation of such measures, as well as to question their long-term implications in relation to the stated objectives, without any guarantee that similar principles could be applied consistently in all types of conflicts⁴. More recently, a wave of protests has swept university campuses worldwide, sparked by the October 7th, 2023 massacre, intensified by the war in Gaza, and reignited by the brief but intense Israel-Iran clash in June 2025. Depending on the context, these protests expressed support for the Israeli and/or Palestinian civilian populations and were accompanied by urgent calls on universities to take a stand on the conflict or even suspend their academic cooperation with Israeli universities. As we know, there have also been numerous protests in Europe and France.

6. Multifaceted attacks, growing vulnerability

The experimental sciences, grouped under the acronym STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), do not benefit from any specific protection against attacks on academic freedom. While until recently, one could easily demonstrate that scientific excellence goes hand in hand with respect for academic freedom, current trends paint a very different picture⁵. A triumphant techno-nationalism is gradually taking hold, in which STEM disciplines are being instrumentalized in the service of regimes hostile to critical knowledge, relegating science to the sole role of a power vector. This development marks a profound break with past decades: in several countries, which we map in this report, the rise of high-performing scientific ecosystems goes hand in hand with a denial of academic freedom. Technological innovation, requiring a significant concentration of financial resources and data, lends itself more easily to

³ See <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/06/22/faculty-should-support-academic-freedom-colleagues-who-buck-conventional-wisdom>

⁴ We took part in this debate, see : “*Les sanctions scientifiques contre la Russie sont un mal nécessaire, mais ne doivent pas “étouffer la société civile”*” (with Pierre Lemonde/CNRS), Le Monde, 14 avril 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2022/04/14/les-sanctions-scientifiques-contre-la-russie-sont-un-mal-necessaire-mais-ne-doivent-pas-etouffer-la-societe-civile_6122155_3232.html

⁵ Fernandez, F., Chykina, V., & Lin, Y. C. (2024). *Science at risk? Considering the importance of academic freedom for STEM research production across 17 OECD countries*, PLOS ONE, 19(1), presents a study based on longitudinal data covering 17 OECD countries between 1981 and 2007 : <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0288431>

increased control within authoritarian structures. In turn, these innovations directly serve the political projects of authoritarian regimes and accentuate the political capture of science.

In France, in response to the war declared on universities by the MAGA movement in the United States, INRAE (National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and Environment) and INSERM (National Institute of Health and Medical Research) were among the first French institutions to react collectively to attacks on science, followed by academies and learned societies such as the AFSP (French Political Science Association) and the AFS (French Sociology Association), among others. Once again, hard sciences are at the forefront of this resistance. The op-ed published in *Le Monde* on March 7, 2025, by a group of French scientists calling for support for the international “Stand Up for Science” movement, is a good illustration of this transdisciplinary awareness. This initiative, largely driven by young researchers, brought together numerous scientists from the fields of mathematics, physics, and biology who were committed to defending the production, dissemination, and accessibility of knowledge in the face of ideological censorship that some described as truly Orwellian⁶. INRAE was one of the first organizations in France to adopt a charter of professional conduct, scientific integrity, and ethics in 2020, which is discussed further in this report. This ethical framework has made it possible to address situations that could threaten academic freedom, including in highly technical fields.

Examples from France in recent years allow us to propose a necessarily non-exhaustive typology of attacks on academic freedom. Some French researchers have been deprived of their freedom abroad, particularly in Iran and Russia. Others have been denied access to their field of research or expelled from third countries. Strategic rivalries have led to increased foreign interference in the collection and processing of sensitive data. In some documented cases, this interference has sought to influence the content, partnerships, and even the positions taken by French academics. Several academic conferences have been canceled, at the initiative of university administrations, student associations, or external actors, amid controversy or claims of risks to public order. Classes have been disrupted by intrusions into lecture halls or targeted after the fact by out-of-context dissemination on social media for the purpose of personal or political stigmatization. Researchers have also been prosecuted based on laws governing freedom of expression, memory laws, or legislation relating to the glorification of terrorism. Gagging proceedings are increasing in number, as is the withdrawal of funding, including doctoral scholarships, on the grounds of content deemed sensitive or controversial. In parallel, some critical approaches in the humanities and social sciences are the subject of ideological conflation, often referred to in a highly pejorative manner as “decolonial excesses” or as falling under the umbrella of ‘wokism’ or so-called “Islamism-leftism.” Finally, certain French regions now condition the granting of public subsidies to adherence to charters, while a sitting Prime minister has intervened, amid intense media hype, in the board of directors of a university, brutally denouncing the actions of its teachers and researchers.

At the same time, a bitter debate, more political than intellectual in nature, is raging in part of the academic world. On one side, a politically well-organized minority group that believes

⁶ “Science : face aux attaques de Trump, la riposte des chercheurs”, joint webinar *The Conversation* and *La Croix* with a CEA research director, a member of the French Academy of Science and a researcher from Columbia University : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I96DdwAJAzc>
-<https://www.lexpress.fr/sciences-sante/exclusif-lappel-des-trois-grands-instituts-de-recherche-francais-trump-ne-cible-pas-la-science-par-J4GNWOBSS5CVRDWCXEONFAH4EM/>
https://www.lemonde.fr/sciences/article/2025/03/04/defendons-les-sciences-face-aux-nouveaux-obscurantismes_6576330_1650684.html

French academic institutions are now threatened, as they perceive it to be the case in the United States, by what is generically referred to as “cancel culture.” On the other side, most academics, who do not subscribe to this diagnosis and remain largely unengaged. Those who do speak out point to the lack of solid empirical evidence to support a “wokist” thesis and consider it an attempt to delegitimize forms of critical thinking that question power relations, established norms, and the blind spots of scientific production—a quest that is precisely at the heart of scientific work. We return to this issue in more detail in various sections of this report.

The most worrying strikes on the very heart of academics teaching and research mission, were carried out by a minority of academics themselves and, for the most part, by external actors: political leaders and pressure groups with orchestrated media campaigns, whose virulence and systematic nature are reminiscent in many ways of a form of contemporary McCarthyism 2.0. It is true that certain forms of student protest have, on occasion, infringed on the freedom of expression of some members of the academic community, as demonstrated in France by the decisions and reflections of the College of Ethics in Higher Education and Research. But this obviously reprehensible phenomenon has remained factually marginal. Furthermore, these cases have been dealt with by the internal regulatory and disciplinary mechanisms implemented by academic institutions. In most situations observed, student protests have had only a limited impact on the effective exercise of academic freedom in the strict sense. Above all, each crisis has been an opportunity for universities to strengthen their pedagogical systems. Following the tragic events of October 7, 2023, universities have mobilized their faculty members to provide a multidisciplinary perspective on the complex geopolitical dynamics at work in the Middle East. Annex 4 lists, by way of example, the many initiatives implemented within one institution and coordinated with other French and international universities. Many other examples could have been included. These initiatives have been largely ignored by the media. It is certainly necessary for universities to self-reflect on what could have anticipated or expressed better in the face of the recent political and media storm that has hit them. But it is equally crucial for public opinion to reach awareness of a deeper reality: universities are the target of a deliberate delegitimization campaign. Furthermore, situations of war inevitably and fundamentally disrupt the balance of any community, including the academic world.

Indeed, and this is undoubtedly one of the most important points of our reflections, war situations must be given special attention, as they profoundly transform the academic world, research, and teaching. We draw on analyses that aptly use the concept of “warscape”⁷ to refer to spaces affected by political, social, and economic violence, within which new power and knowledge relationships emerge⁸. The War on Gaza and Middle East Political Science project launched in 2024 by Marc Lynch at George Washington University, is one of the few rigorous attempts to date to analyze the direct impact of war on the concrete conditions of knowledge production. In the past, this mechanism has been observed and documented in the Balkans, in the context of the “war on terror” following the September 11 attacks, and more structurally, in the academic treatment of the Israeli Palestinian conflict over several decades. In such contexts, researchers are never perceived as mere observers. They become, despite themselves, full-fledged actors in the warscape. Logics of polarization, alignment, or exclusion shape their position, which in turn may reinforce or challenge these dynamics. Armed conflicts also generate a specific economy of expertise. Certain topics are suddenly given increased academic

⁷ Concept forged by Carolyn Nordstrom based on her research in Mozambique in the 1990s.

⁸ We draw direct inspiration from the work of Bonnefoy, L. [*French academia, Gaza and Israel after October 7, 2023. A critical assessment*](#). *Political Anthropological Research on International Social sciences (PARISS)*, 2024, 6 (1), pp. 27-43.

value. New funding, career opportunities, and greater public visibility are concentrated on research topics deemed relevant in the strategic or ideological context of the moment.

These transformations raise serious methodological and ethical dilemmas. Access to the field is often precarious, the risks to those being studied are considerable, and the tensions between engagement and distancing become difficult to sustain. Added to this are the sometimes covert explicit pressures exerted by the institutions that fund the research. The demand for expertise intensifies in contexts of violence, but is accompanied by increasingly marked political oversight, which constrains researchers and shapes the very conditions of knowledge. Edward Said, in *“Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World”*⁹, decisively exposed the ideological biases at work in academic production in times of war. Under the guise of scientific objectivity, supposedly neutral approaches have contributed to the erasure of local voices and experiences in favor of dominant narratives generally shaped in Western centers of knowledge. Anyone claiming to genuinely analyze the situation in universities since the outbreak of the current decade wars, particularly in the Near and Middle East, cannot and should not ignore these dynamics. These must be fully integrated into any nuanced reading of contemporary changes in the academic sphere in the context of conflict. Many universities around the world, including in France, are consequently waking up to the fact that their departments and laboratories are sometimes fractured, not so much because of events that have taken place on campus itself, but because of the political and media exploitation to which they have been subjected.

The challenge facing knowledge, research, and academics today in their ability to preserve their freedom of action is by no means an isolated or temporary phenomenon. This experience goes far beyond the academic sphere, even if attacks on academic freedom take different forms from those affecting for instance press freedom or cultural institutions. The gradual erosion of academic freedom is part of a broader movement to weaken fundamental freedoms, particularly freedom of expression, as we show through maps below. The press, the legal, medical, and scientific professions—in short, all sectors based on built up knowledge and embodied by experts—are now under similar pressure. Anti-vaccination campaigns, the promotion of pseudo-medicine, and the rise of conspiracy theories: these phenomena, present in many countries, are part of the same process of mistrust toward established forms of intellectual legitimacy.

The longitudinal survey conducted over almost fifty years by the Center for Political Research (CEVIPOF), the Center for Socio-Political Data (CDSP) at Sciences Po Paris, and the University of Lorraine¹⁰, highlights the deep-rooted mechanisms underlying the now widespread challenging of scientific knowledge. Three major lessons can be drawn from this survey. For one, religiosity and level of education, long considered the main determinants of skepticism toward science, are seeing a decline in their influence. In Europe in particular, the differences in attitudes between believers and non-believers, as well as between graduates and non-graduates, are tending to narrow. This development can be explained by the democratization of access to knowledge and by the wider spread of a critical stance towards all forms of authority, including scientific authority. Secondly, as mentioned above, all scientific issues are becoming increasingly politicized: issues such as climate change, public health, emerging technologies, history, and gender are increasingly viewed through ideological prisms. Support for or mistrust of scientific discourse is increasingly dependent on political affiliations,

⁹ Bonnefoy L., *opus.cit.*

¹⁰ Survey “*Les Français et la science*” (2001–2020), N° 3033, CEVIPOF / CDSP, Sciences Po / Université de Lorraine.

at the risk of further fragmenting the public sphere, in a division that has become part of our daily lives. Finally, a new form of populism is emerging, known as “sciento-populism”, based on the strategic exploitation of mistrust of science.

Certain political and media actors exploit this mistrust to capture public opinion, legitimize identity narratives, or defend interests that run counter to established scientific knowledge. In this context, it is essential to understand the contemporary dynamics of skepticism toward science, as this conditions our ability to rethink the ways in which knowledge is legitimized in the combined era of post-truth and artificial intelligence. This is also essential for understanding the profound transformations that democratic regimes are undergoing today.

We should be alarmed by the fact that attacks on academic freedom are no longer confined to authoritarian or unstable regimes but are now being observed at the very heart of constitutional democracies, still perceived as strongholds of the rule of law. However upsetting this observation is, we must accurately identify the mechanisms at work and remain clear-headed and effective in our search for solutions. Protecting universities, research, and knowledge is not simply a corporatist knee jerk reaction. On the contrary, it is about preserving an asset of greater significance: the conditions that make a democratic future possible. It also means defending our scientific security, a fundamental strategic issue central to the exercise of our European and national sovereignty, and one to which we return repeatedly in this report. What is at stake is the collective ability of democratic societies to reiterate the constitutive autonomy of science in the face of all forms of instrumentalization, whether political, religious, economic, or media/ideological. What is at stake is the preservation (or relinquishment) of the very foundations of the Enlightenment vision: the emancipatory, rational, critical knowledge, free from absolute power of any kind. Defending academic freedom therefore means protecting a certain idea of science as a potential counterweight to power, a promise of clarity in the face of obscurantism to understand and solve global challenges.

This lucid but resolutely constructive perspective underpins this report. It is based on the observation that a true culture of academic freedom remains, for the most part, to be built in France. This deficiency can break new grounds to a fertile space for institutional innovation, professional mobilization, and consequently, democratic opportunity. Not only do we have no choice but to act, but it is possible and necessary to transform the current situation, however worrying it may be, into a leverage to strengthen this common foundation. Academic freedom cannot be considered an intangible asset, nor can it be limited to a defensive posture. It is above all a tool, a decisive leverage for rebuilding, in our century, a production of knowledge reoriented towards human development.

A team of lawyers from the University of Bordeaux provide a valuable analysis in their “*The resistance of the French legal system to a potential authoritarian shock*” report. Their approach offers rich food for thought on the role and fragility of academic freedom in a rule of law-abiding state such as France. The authors observe a now widely shared insight: in the past decade, the European Union has faced a worrying erosion of the rule of law. Their approach is original: the authors propose a legal stress test of the French system. Inspired by banking regulation methods, it identifies the institutional flaws that an illiberal government could exploit to capture institutions, block democratic change, and steer the regime toward a form of hybrid authoritarianism. Would France be able to resist such an authoritarian shift today? Their well-supported answer is instructive. Three areas appear particularly vulnerable: the media, civil society, and universities. Regarding the latter, which is of interest to us here, they pose a severe diagnosis. It appears that several factors structurally and rapidly weaken the ability of

universities to act as a counterweight to power: a strong dependence on political power, which controls funding, recruitment procedures, and the accreditation of degrees; a chronic institutional weakness, patent in job cuts, administrative overload, and a lack of time for civic engagement; the lack of awareness in conflicts of interest, which undermines the public credibility of academics; and a weak foothold in civil society, caught between public dependence and the logic of capture by private interests. The authors also emphasize the frailty of public research funding and dependence on local subsidies. In conclusion, French law offers academics some protection from political power but leaves them largely exposed to pressure from private actors. Essentially, the lack of institutional independence prevents universities from fully assuming their critical role in a democratic state governed by the rule of law. Therefore, while an “American-style” or “Hungarian-style” scenario remains unlikely in the short term, the structural weaknesses identified cannot rule it out. Among the cross-cutting recommendations outlined to strengthen countervailing powers, two priority measures emerge: making functional protection mandatory for academics targeted by gagging proceedings and limiting, by all possible means, the direct influence of political, economic, and religious powers on academic institutions.

3 Bringing academic freedom to life: a comprehensive strategy

In anticipation of the rise of illiberalism, this report seeks to formulate recommendations based on a rigorous conception of the definition of the university: a space dedicated to the embodiment and production of intellectual pluralism, guided by a certain idea of humanity, knowledge, and freedom. The other strong conviction of this work is the positive, even joyful, promotion of academic freedom and its defense. One of the most notable aspects of this mission have been the solidarity and coordination of efforts within the scientific community, evidenced by the proposal of common solutions. Today, however relatively late, this movement is very rapidly growing broader, galvanized by a greater awareness of the current fragility of the university.

This report is structured around four main pillars, bringing together 15 main proposals and a total of 65 sub-proposals or concrete measures. These proposals are the result of an in-depth combination of documentary analysis, the mobilization of existing initiatives, and a series of interviews conducted in France and abroad with figures involved in Higher education, Research, associations, and political and administrative bodies. Furthermore, in the concrete responses to the existential threats to academic knowledge, we have deliberately favored measures aimed at strengthening the conditions for scientific activity rather than measures aimed at organizing its isolation in a bell jar, even in the name of precaution. For this very reason, this report links security and freedom of research. In times of uncertainty, perhaps especially in those times, it is important to resist the temptation to retreat into defensiveness: the risk inherent in the quest for knowledge is also its *raison d'être*. It would certainly be understandable, in a context marked by major political tensions and strong ideological pressures, to favor protective mechanisms: a proliferation of legal instruments, preventive frameworks, and institutional self-preserving measures. These responses may, in some cases, prove necessary. But they must not transform universities into normative fortresses, more concerned with compliance than with their fundamental mission of producing and transmitting new knowledge. Research, by its very nature, implies boldness. It requires the courage to explore the uncertain, to question the obvious, to challenge established frameworks, and to initiate legitimate controversies. It calls for spaces of freedom, regulated but always open, designed to foster the critical vitality at the very core of the mission of any university. It is therefore crucial that every actor in the academic ecosystem (teachers, researchers, staff,

management, partners) be able to exercise their responsibilities within a framework designed to protect the very dynamics of scientific work.

The four priority pillars of the recommendations proposed in this report are: reasserting academic freedom as a fundamental principle of law; undertaking a restructuring of universities in order to strengthen their capacity to defend and embody this principle; promoting the emergence of a shared culture of academic freedom within society; and finally, placing this dynamic within the broader framework of European science diplomacy. The levels of actors involved are as follows: the State, the scientific ecosystem, civil society, and the European Union.

The first pillar of recommendations is to provide academic freedom with a robust legal foundation adapted to contemporary threats. We propose to explicitly enshrine academic freedom in the Constitutional block, through a constitutional revision, either by adding an article to the current Constitution or by adopting a dedicated integrated charter. If not, a framework law could define its fundamental principles and procedural guarantees. These approaches could be mutually reinforced by political, jurisprudential, or interpretative strategies, such as the recognition of academic freedom as a fundamental principle recognized by the laws of the Republic (PFRLR), or the broadening of the scope of the 1946 Constitution preamble. This reform would aim to reaffirm the independence of staff, freedom of teaching and research, the autonomy of institutions, and the fundamental role of science in a democracy. On a symbolic level, enshrining academic freedom in the Constitution would constitute a powerful gesture: it would establish, at the highest level of the legal hierarchy, that the free production of knowledge is inseparable from the very principles of constitutional rule of law.

In addition, to deal with gagging procedures specifically targeting academics, it would be appropriate to reactivate the 2017 Mazeaud report recommendations. It is necessary to establish an autonomous system for the protection of research sources, prohibiting disclosure of confidential information, except in strictly defined cases, with the support of the relevant professional bodies. Finally, in accordance with the recommendations of the 2021 André Gattolin report, we propose to fully mobilize the nation's scientific and technical potential protection system (PPST) by extending its scope to the humanities, social sciences and the intangible heritage, by integrating more diffuse risks of influence and interference, and by revising its evaluation criteria to better articulate national security and scientific freedom.

The second pillar points to the adoption of several concrete measures by Higher education institutions. We propose to enhance functional protection. It is critical to automatically activate functional protection measures to ensure rapid and systematic intervention. This protection must be extended to a wide range of beneficiaries, including teachers and researchers but also administrative staff where necessary, as well as students involved in exposed academic activities.

Rapid assistance and response mechanisms, coordinated at the national level could be set up: each higher education institution should have an immediate assistance protocol in place to respond without delay to crisis situations or violations of academic freedom. This local organization must be part of a national coordination system to harmonize responses, ensure equal treatment between institutions, and promote best practices sharing. We also propose the creation of a public fund dedicated to covering the legal costs incurred by academics who have been unjustly attacked, particularly in the context of SLAPP/gagging proceedings, as well as an independent national observatory responsible for identifying violations of academic

freedom, ensuring constant monitoring, and issuing public alerts whenever necessary. Mandatory training should be provided to management teams, human resources departments, and ethics officers to raise their awareness on academic freedom specific issues. Finally, to support exposed staff and students, a national “institutional kit” would be made available, including practical information sheets, lists of lawyers, communication recommendations, and access to psychological support.

To strengthen prevention, each university could appoint a representative dedicated to academic freedom, responsible for ensuring the proper application of the measures and raising awareness among university communities. In addition, the adoption of a confidentiality charter specific to sensitive research is essential to guarantee the secrecy of sources and ensure data protection, in accordance with the requirements of the GDPR. These measures will necessarily be accompanied by preventive training for all stakeholders.

Outsourced legal assistance and academic solidarity are a priority: the negotiation of framework agreements with specialized law firms would provide high-quality legal support, quickly accessible to academics facing threats or legal proceedings related to their academic freedom. In addition, the creation of a secure and independent external reporting mechanism would promote confidentiality and protection for whistleblowers within the academic community.

Also, the institutionalization of a peer solidarity platform would encourage collective mobilization and mutual support, providing an important lever for dealing with pressure and intimidation.

Enhancing and strengthening the position of the mediator for national education and higher education could provide a peaceful means of resolving conflicts affecting academic freedom. In this context, we invite universities to gradually adopt academic freedom charters formalizing their ethical commitments, their principles of democratic governance, and their transparency policy regarding the reporting and handling of violations. These charters will constitute a common foundation guaranteeing institutional recognition of academic freedom.

Universities should also establish strict ethical rules governing the funding of research, whether public or partnership based. These rules must guarantee the transparency of funding sources, impose enforceable standards, and strengthen ethics or professional conduct committees to prevent conflicts of interest and preserve scientific integrity.

In lieu of a principle of neutrality, we recommend the establishment of an “external institutional duty of discretion” principle so that institutions are not forced to take a public stance on issues that go beyond their scientific mission. Such a principle can only be legitimate in the absence of an internal institutional duty of discretion/restraint: academic freedom of expression within the university must, on the contrary, be guaranteed and organized in an explicitly democratic manner, through decent university governance.

Freedom and security in research must evolve hand in hand. We propose a greater integration of security and defense officials (FSD) into research missions with full-time or at least part-time presence, depending on the size of the institutions, ensuring their training and academic grounding. We recommend the establishment of systematic traceability of access authorizations/denials to ensure transparency and fairness, as well as the regular review of decisions to classify Restricted Areas (ZRR in French), in consultation with unit directors, researchers, and the Senior Defense and Security Official (HFDS). A formal notification of any

access denial to a ZRR, with a right of appeal or mediation before an independent scientific committee, possibly including the MESR's Ethics Committee should be granted. Security measures must also be adapted to the specific characteristics of the humanities, considering the diversity of fields, international partnerships, and editorial practices.

Finally, we propose launching a national action research program dedicated to academic freedom to document violations, experiment with innovative methodologies, and propose tools to strengthen researchers' resilience in the face of restrictions.

The third pillar of our recommendations addresses the urgent need to foster a genuine culture of academic freedom in the public sphere. A major national awareness campaign could be launched for the 2025-2026 academic year, combining several concrete and complementary actions. This would include simple and powerful messages through a widespread distribution of posters and videos in universities, on public transport, and on social media. To reach a diverse audience, this campaign would involve collaborations with illustrators, comic book authors, and scientific content creators, supported by a unifying hashtag aimed at gathering testimonials and support. Renaming the Science Festival “Science and Academic Freedom Festival” would open laboratories to the public, through multidisciplinary conferences promoting dialogue between researchers and citizens. A prize would be awarded to the most outstanding initiatives. Finally, student training on these issues and their engagement would be encouraged through a call for funded projects, encouraging them to create events, exhibitions, or digital projects on this theme. Much like participatory science, the aim is to make citizens full participants in the defense of academic freedom.

To give coherence and direction to these dynamics, it is proposed that France Universités convene, without delay, a general assembly on academic freedom bringing together all relevant actors to develop an action plan.

The fourth pillar is based on anchoring this program in an ambitious European framework for APC. The European Union stands by and openly supports academic freedom science diplomacy. This ambition requires the lucidity to learn from the current trajectory of the two other major scientific powers, the United States and China and self-reflect on the worrying decline of academic freedom within the European Union itself. Despite their opposing models, these two countries are converging towards new forms of ideological control over research. At this turning point, as the link between science and power is being redefined, one question stands out: what role do Europe, and the nation states of the European Union intend to play in practice?

Firstly, research security is recognized as a strategic pillar, with the adoption of a gradually shared definition protecting infrastructure, data, and researchers from interference and misuse. This involves promoting a clever and contextualized “smart de-risking” approach, experimenting with pilot risk assessment mechanisms in universities, while sustaining data confidentiality and platforms for reporting interference. We should support risk mapping in science policies, the creation of a European program dedicated to research security integrated into existing mechanisms such as Horizon Europe, and an independent European observatory to monitor violations of academic freedom.

In addition, the current European Higher Education Sector Observatory (EHESO) should be renewed with the creation of a genuine European university ranking alongside a European index of academic freedom based on normative data and empirical practices. In cooperation with the European University Association (EUA), this index would stimulate internal reforms on

academic freedom. Subsequently, targeted lobbying should be carried out to include academic freedom among the criteria for international university rankings (QS, Times Higher Education, Shanghai Jiaotong). This approach would promote academic freedom as a criterion for academic excellence on par with scientific publications and professional integration.

The alliances of European universities (65 to date)¹¹ must become proactive actors in aligning security and academic freedom, by integrating research security into ethics committees and international partnership departments. In keeping with this, an initiative to establish a European label for institutions, to become an international label, would reward institutions committed to the effective protection of academic freedom. This label would be based on specific criteria, such as democratic governance, transparency, the establishment of appropriate legal and financial mechanisms, training for stakeholders, and the existence of independent committees.

Finally, investment is needed at the European level through science diplomacy, by supporting reception facilities for threatened researchers and initiatives to establish a European network for academics in exile. The creation of a “European refugee scientist talent passport” long called for by the PAUSE¹² program, would facilitate the mobility and integration of exiled researchers.

France, through its higher education institutions, via France Universités, in conjunction with the European University Association (EUA), should play an active role in supporting European initiatives in favor of academic freedom. These initiatives are based on principles that are often more protective and more attentive to contemporary issues than those currently in force at the national level. Such a dynamic, driven from the bottom up by actors in the field (universities, professional networks, European alliances), would help strengthen French science diplomacy. Although proactive, as evidenced by the Marseille Declaration¹³ (2022) on international cooperation in research and the *Choose France* summit (2025), this diplomacy remains limited by a lack of resources and potentially undermined by partisan divisions in the national debate.

Finally, advocating academic freedom as a fundamental freedom is not enough; it is critical to embody its rigorousness, foremost among which is academic ethics. The current era calls for increased vigilance and unprecedented ethical standards in the scientific community. This price must be paid for preserving the very credibility of scientific discourse in the public sphere, a magnificent ambition to which this work aims to contribute. This report is intended for all those who, in their respective roles as teachers, professors, supervisors, students, members of civil society, elected officials, journalists, economic actors, private and public actors, and ordinary citizens, wish to take an active part in defending the independence of knowledge, the prerequisite for a free society.

¹¹ Between 2019 and 2024, sixty-five European university alliances were selected as part of the dedicated call for proposals under the Erasmus+ program, with the aim of inventing the European university of the future. “*In parallel with the last call for proposals in 2024, the project “[FOREU4ALL](https://www.campusfrance.org/fr/les-alliances-d-universites-europeennes), which aims to strengthen the exchange of good practices between alliances by establishing a community of practice and to strengthen synergies beyond the alliances”: <https://www.campusfrance.org/fr/les-alliances-d-universites-europeennes>*

¹² See <https://www.programmepause.fr/en/>

¹³ French Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Marseille Declaration on international cooperation in Research and Innovation (R&I), 2022.

II Academic freedom: a principle with multiple roots, late recognition in French doctrine

Anyone who undertakes a reflection on academic freedom inevitably encounters debates about its very definition. This was the case during the drafting of this report. On the one hand, some of our interlocutors invoked the supposed absence of a stable and shared definition; on the other, relativist positions highlighted the plurality of approaches, attributed to cultural specificities, in line with competing discourses on Human rights, for example. From the very onset of this work, we therefore had to deal with a subject that was perceived, even in France, as fundamentally ambiguous. We also had to respond to the skepticism of those who consider academic freedom to be too closely tied to a Western conception of academic knowledge. While the contours of this “liberal Western world” now appear more uncertain than ever, the idea remains that the Global South is submitted to an imposed norm that the North profoundly misconceives and rejects when applied to itself. Such arguments are generally put forward by illiberal-authoritarian discourses, with or without emerging scientific ecosystems, depending on the case. The fact remains that the concept of academic freedom is, globally either non-existent or ineffective, and in all cases largely misunderstood. This lack of understanding and shared culture facilitates the growing forms of interference that are currently affecting the academic world on a global scale.

The following developments, tracing the main stages in the history of the concept of academic freedom, are based on William Kirby's book, *Empires of Ideas: Creating the Modern University from Germany to America to China* (2022). The author presents a cross-sectional history of modern universities of excellence spanning more than two centuries. He begins, naturally, with the Free University of Berlin, the matrix of the modern university model, proceeds to analyze its adaptation and rise in the United States, and then highlights today's rise of Chinese universities to the top of the world rankings. W. Kirby demonstrates the decisive role played by academic freedom, up to the present day, in promoting excellence in research and teaching. Unfortunately, the author does not dwell on the downside of China's rise: a true contemporary counterexample, where a highly efficient scientific ecosystem is fueled by draconian ideological control mechanisms serving as an inspiration to both emerging and older scientific powers.

In his books *Your Own Time* and *Versions of Academic Freedom: From Professionalism to Revolution*, Stanley Fish identifies, following Max Weber-style ideal types, five schools or conceptions of academic freedom¹⁴. The first school is the functionalist approach to academic freedom, applicable only in specific fields and for tasks clearly defined in their employment contract, encapsulated in the “*academic freedom as just a job*” formulation. From this perspective, academics should not engage in social debates and strictly limit themselves to commenting their research topics. The second school, dubbed “*for the common good*”, emphasizes that social progress results from the cross-fertilization between fundamental research and the development of a public space based on scientifically established truths. The

¹⁴ See <https://www.mindingthecampus.org/2014/10/24/stanley-fish-looks-postmodernly-at-academic-freedom/>

third school, “*the academic exceptionalism or uncommon beings*” is based on the specificity of the academic career path, which, due to their training and skills, should benefit from exceptional, almost absolute protections. The fourth school, “*it’s for critique*” argues that academic freedom is essential because it creates a critical vital space for democracy that must be free from all forms of obstruction. The last school, “*it’s for revolution*” sees academic freedom as an indispensable tool for deconstructing and ultimately abolishing the norms governing academic life considered as a mere manifestation of the bourgeois, capitalist, predatory, and elitist functioning of our postmodern societies.

We will show that academic freedom, whose roots date back to the European Middle Ages, has evolved considerably since its early forms as a privilege granted to students, to its recent recognition in instruments protecting fundamental rights¹⁵. As a reminder, university franchises emerged in France following two years of strikes, negotiations, and the exile of professors from the University of Paris to other European universities in response to the 1229 National Guard violent repression of their students. It should be remembered that universities were subject to ecclesiastical justice: allowing lay men-at-arms to attack students, who were clerics, [was already] a threat to the autonomy of the university¹⁶. Pope Gregory IX, himself a former student in Paris, ended this historic crisis by granting the University of Paris judicial independence through the April 13, 1231, papal bull (*Parens Scientiarum Universitas* [Mother University of Sciences])¹⁷, while releasing teachings from previous censorship and establishing the right to cease work (the right to strike)¹⁸, explains historian Nathalie Gorochov. However, the concept of academic freedom took on a collective and positive meaning later, mainly outside France, at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. In the wake of the revolutions, the birth of modern university is a result of the political restructuring of the European States. “*The principle of autonomy for academics and researchers from all forms of power is the cornerstone of the modern (European) university*”¹⁹. Initially conceived as a “jurisdictional privilege”, this freedom has essentially become a guarantee of autonomy for universities and their employees.

We shall see that this freedom is too often mistakenly confused and intertwined with freedom of expression, from which it remains distinct. Indeed, freedom of expression is now firmly established in international law as a fundamental human right, forged in opposition to censorship and arbitrary authority. Its principle is firmly enshrined in Article 11 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789), Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (1950). Conversely, the recognition of academic freedom has followed a more discreet and uncertain path, from an individual professional protection to a recognition of its institutional dimensions. However, this shift remains incomplete and evidenced by the persistent gap between doctrine and actual practice: academic freedom is recognized in certain international and national instruments but remains unevenly guaranteed and protected in practice.

¹⁵ See Céline Romainville

: https://dial.uclouvain.be/pr/boreal/object/boreal%3A185955/datastream/PDF_01/view

¹⁶ We recall the original religious status of universities, spaces whose “sacredness” must still, in a sense, be preserved today. See Jacques Verger, *Des monastères à l’université. Le Moyen Âge et la première unification culturelle de l’Europe* : C:/Users/166434/Downloads/conf-rence-des-monaste-res-à l’université-jacques-verger-20861.pdf

¹⁷ See <https://laportelatine.org/formation/magistere/bulle-parens-scientiarum-universitas-1231>

¹⁸ See Nathalie Gorochov, *Les maîtres parisiens et la genèse de l’Université (1200-1231)*. *Cahiers de Recherches Médiévales et Humanistes* (2009) 18:53-73.

¹⁹ See *Guaranteeing effective academic freedom*, March 2021: <https://rogueesr.fr/liberte-academique/>

1. The Prussian concept of “freedom of science”

The positive concept of *Wissenschaftsfreiheit* (“freedom of science”) was developed in the 18th century in the wake of counter-revolutionary struggles to rebuild civil society. It took shape in the German neo-classical tradition, particularly under the impetus of Wilhelm von Humboldt, founder of the modern public university in Berlin in 1810 and still structures the organization of Higher education and Research in Germany today. This concept is a direct legacy of the German Enlightenment and is not limited to individual freedom of research. It also includes the university institutional architecture, its procedural rules, and the delimitation of academic competences. As lawyer Camille Fernandes shows in a particularly illuminating way, this holistic conception of academic freedom has been consolidated through the steady jurisdiction of the German Federal Constitutional Court, which has clarified its contours and strengthened its scope²⁰.

Humboldt argued that the modern university should encourage academic freedom of thought, and not limiting itself to training professionals in specific fields. He advocated for the autonomy of universities, free from government regulation, and for their right to select and organize their own *curricula*. Humboldt also asserted that teaching and research should form “*an inseparable unity*.” He envisioned a community of teachers and students, where independent thinking and a sense of responsibility would become “*the mandate, method, and goal of education*.”

Largely ignored by the Frankfurt Constitution (1849), these principles were nevertheless in the Weimar Constitution (1919, Art. 142), which stipulates that “*art, science, and teaching are free*.” Camille Fernandes usefully recalls Article 158, according to which “*respect and protection*” of this right were to be ensured, even abroad, by international conventions for the achievements of German science, technology, and art. The Basic Law (May 1949) then incorporated into its famous Article 5 on freedom of expression and of the press a specific reference to “*research and teaching*”: these must be exercised “*in accordance with the Constitution*” and a link is clearly established between the freedom of expression, artistic freedom, and freedom of the press.

In 1973, the Federal Constitutional Court stated that the principle of *Wissenschaftsfreiheit*, as established, implied that the personal scientific activity of academics must be free from external public intervention. In other words, personal rights and institutional rights must be organized in perfect cohesion. This led to the Constitutional Court's linking the effectiveness of individual freedoms to the right of academics to participate in the management and direct governance of their universities. The Court also established “*subjective*” rights for university professors, guaranteeing their freedom of expression in the context of their teaching or the publication of their research results. It asserted that Article 5 (3) of the Basic Law conferred “*a right to the adoption of public measures of an organizational nature that are indispensable for protecting a space of freedom by promoting free scientific activity*.”

2. The American version of Academic freedom

The American term “academic freedom” has become *lingua franca*. Directly inspired by the German concept mentioned above, it was profoundly reshaped with the spread of the American university model around the world over a century ago. A new theorization of so-called “professional” academic freedom, was issued by the American Association of University

²⁰ Fernandes, C. *La liberté académique de A à Z* (Academic freedom from A to Z). Paris, Dalloz, 2024.

Professors (AAUP) in its Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure, drafted in 1915 by Professors Edwin R. A. Seligman and Arthur O. Lovejoy. This founding text quickly became an essential reference for academic freedom in the United States, and in many other countries, highlighting the primary duty of academics to seek and establish the truth as they perceive it. This American version of freedom is in some respects more restricted than the German model, as it sets prohibitions and emphasizes the individual rights over those of the academics. A specific code of academic ethics and the principle of tenure were established to compensate for these restrictive aspects. Professional freedom then gradually became a constitutional right.

The 1940 Declaration, still in force today in the United States, defines academic freedom around three pillars: freedom of research, freedom of teaching, and freedom of expression outside the academic setting. As members of their professional community, American academics enjoy the same rights and obligations as do all other citizens. However, when expressing themselves or acting in a personal capacity, they must be careful not to imply that they represent their university. As citizens engaged in a profession whose legitimacy and integrity depend on academic freedom, academics have a special responsibility to promote conditions conducive to free inquiry and to encourage a better understanding of this principle among the public. This framework has given rise to the concept of professional academic freedom, which the AAUP continues to defend vigorously in the face of the challenges posed by Donald Trump's mandates.

An interpretation of the First Amendment has helped establish the concept of academic freedom on a constitutional basis and enable the academic community to develop a doctrine of its own. “*Congress shall make no law (...) abridging the freedom of speech*”. This approach is based on the dissenting opinion of Judge Holmes, in the November 1919 *Abrams v. United States* ruling. He stated: “*When men have realized that time has upset many fighting faiths, they may come to believe even more than they believe the very foundations of their own conduct that the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas – that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market, and that truth is the only ground upon which their wishes safely can be carried out. That, at any rate, is the theory of our Constitution*”.

Academic freedom in the United States is therefore based on several foundations, and its effective protection varies according to the law of each state, customs, institutional practices, and the status of Higher education institutions. However, particularly since the McCarthy era, its constitutional basis has been progressively upheld by Supreme Court rulings based on the First Amendment to the Constitution.

- The *Adler v. Board of Education*, 342 U.S. 485 (1952) decision mentions academic freedom for the first time, in a dissenting opinion. Justice Douglas stated that “*There can be no real academic freedom in that environment. Where suspicion fills the air and holds scholars in line for fear of their jobs, there can be no exercise of the free intellect*”.

- In *Wieman v. Updegraff*, 344 U.S. 183 (1952), Justice Frankfurter emphasized the need to protect the freedom of teachers, stating that they must be models of open-mindedness and critical thinking.

- The *Sweezy v. New Hampshire* decision, 354 U.S. 234 (1957), marked a turning point in the development of a constitutional doctrine on academic freedom. The judge set out the “*four essential freedoms*” for a university: a) to determine, on academic grounds, who may teach, b)

to determine what may be taught, c) to decide how it should be taught, and d) to choose who may be admitted studying.

- Finally, *Keyishian v. Board of Regents*, 385 U.S. 589 (1967) extended First Amendment protection to academic freedom. The Court ruled that the imposition of a loyalty oath violated academic freedom and freedom of association. Justice Brennan pointed out: “*Our Nation is deeply committed to safeguarding academic freedom, which is of transcendent value to all of us, and not merely to the teachers concerned. That freedom is therefore a special concern of the First Amendment, which does not tolerate laws that cast a pall of orthodoxy over the classroom*”²¹.

This work to protect academic freedom in US domestic law has been echoed internationally, particularly in recent instruments developed by the United Nations and UNESCO.

3. United Nations contributions

The UNESCO Recommendation on Academic Freedom of November 1997 establishes a definition recognized at the level of soft international law, and as such should be mentioned. In addition, UNESCO emphasizes the essential link between the academic freedom of all teachers in higher education and the autonomy of institutions. However, this freedom is subject to certain limits and accompanied by duties and responsibilities that UNESCO describes as “*specific*.” We have identified four key elements:

- Academic freedom includes freedom of teaching. Teachers must teach their courses without interference, if they respect recognized professional principles, such as intellectual responsibility and rigor. Teachers should not be forced to teach content that goes against their knowledge or conscience or use methods that are contrary to Human rights principles. Teachers must also have a direct role in the development of *curricula*.

- Academic freedom implies the freedom to express opinions without doctrinal constraints, as well as the freedom to conduct research and disseminate its results. This means that teachers can conduct research without interference, provided they respect the principles of professional rigor. They also have the right to publish and share the results of their work, and express their opinions about the institution in which they work, without fear of censorship.

-Academic freedom includes the right to participate freely in professional or academic organizations, which implies a principle of collegiality. Furthermore, all teachers should be able to carry out their duties without discrimination of any kind.

-Finally, academic freedom includes the right to engage in professional activities outside the university, particularly when these are of an intellectual function or mission in nature.

In summary, the UNESCO defined academic freedom emphasizes freedom of teaching and debate without doctrinal constraints, freedom to conduct research and publish its results, and the right to freely express opinions, including about one's own institution or professional context. All reference texts are found in the United Nations Human Rights Council document

²¹ See <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/385/589/>

on the Principles for the Application of International Law and Principles of Academic Freedom²².

Moreover, Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aims to protect academic freedom as a fundamental element of freedom of expression and freedom of opinion. It specifies that freedom of expression includes “*freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art or through any other media of one's choice*”. This freedom also extends to the field of education and emphasizes the importance of specifically protect historical research. The Covenant Committee has stated that laws that “*criminalize the expression of opinions on historical facts are incompatible with the obligations imposed on States Parties by the Covenant with regard to respect for freedom of opinion and freedom of expression*”. Article 15, § 4, of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights goes further. It requires its member states to “*respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research and creative activities*”. The scope of this freedom has also been clearly defined: freedom of science is interdependent with the right to participate in cultural life and is closely linked to the right to education. Regarding academic freedom, the Committee emphasizes that “*members of the academic community are free, individually or collectively, to acquire, develop, and transmit knowledge and ideas through research, teaching, study, discussion, documentation, production, creation, or publication*”. Naturally, the exercise of academic freedom entails obligations, such as respect for the academic freedom of others, the guarantee of fair debates, and equal treatment without discrimination.

These positions from UNESCO and the Covenants have been considered by the International Science Council (ISC), the institution of science diplomacy *par excellence*. Founded in the 1930s, representing 80% of the world's science, it serves informally as a scientific advisory body to the Office of the United Nations Secretary-General. The ISC sustained the dual principle of scientific freedom and responsibility, as well as “*the right to participate in and benefit from science*”²³ in March 2024.

4. The contemporary European framework

Academic freedom within the European Union is structured by several legal instruments. On the one hand, Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights stipulates that “*arts and scientific research shall be free*” and, at the request of the German delegation, “*academic freedom shall be (explicitly) respected*”. This provision implies *de facto* recognition of the institutional autonomy of universities. On the other hand, the case law of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) has extended the guarantee of freedom of expression (art. 10) to include the expression of ideas and opinions in an academic context. Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 also mentions “*the right to education*”. Furthermore, the Council of Europe has adopted recommendations on academic freedom, emphasizing its importance in the broader promotion of democracy and Human rights.

Several notable decisions of the ECHR have contributed to shaping the concept of academic freedom, although the exact number of judgments dealing directly with this issue in the

²² See https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Principles-for-Implementing-the-Right-to-Academic-Freedom_FINAL.pdf

²³ See <https://council.science/our-work/right-to-science/>

HUDOC²⁴ database remains difficult to establish. However, the case law of the ECHR has gradually asserted academic freedom as an essential aspect of the freedom of expression protected by Article 10 of the Convention. Through a series of judgments, the Court has reaffirmed that scientific debate, even when controversial, deserves enhanced protection in a democratic society.

In the *Lombardi Vallauri v. Italy* judgment²⁵ (ECHR, October 20, 2009, app. 39128/05), the ECHR strongly reaffirmed that academic freedom, as a specific manifestation of the freedom of expression protected by Article 10 of the Convention, involves not only the right to produce and disseminate ideas, but also the right to access academic positions without unjustified ideological discrimination. In the case in question, the refusal to appoint Mr. Lombardi Vallauri to a teaching position at the Catholic University of Milan on the grounds that some of his philosophical and theological views were considered incompatible with the official doctrine of the Church was found to be contrary to the Convention. The Court considered that the applicant had been dismissed without the necessary procedural guarantees observed and that the reasons given amounted to an unlawful interference with academic freedom. In this judgment, the Court emphasized that academic institutions, even those with a religious character, must respect the fundamental principles of transparency, pluralism, and the free flow of scientific ideas in a democratic society. *Lombardi Vallauri c. Italie* usefully supplements the judgment in *Sorguç v. Turkey*²⁶, by affirming that academic freedom extends both to the freedom of expression of researchers and to the conditions of access to and participation in university life. Similarly, in the *Mustafa Erdogan v. Turkey* (2014) case, the Court ruled that a professor's criticism of a decision by the Turkish Constitutional Court must be protected by freedom of expression, understood as a cardinal element of academic freedom, the ECHR refined its own conception of a specific freedom²⁷. Finally, with *Güneri v. Turkey* (2019), the Court established that academic freedom must include the right of researchers to conduct their work without interference, thereby strengthening the principle of university autonomy.

Despite laudable intentions, however, the last decade has shown that the European Union does not yet have sufficient means to protect academic freedom. This became clear in the landmark case between the Central European University (CEU) and Hungary, brought by the European Commission before the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). The conflict between the Hungarian government and the international university founded in 1991 in Budapest by George Soros, is also a prime example of the real threats to academic freedom within the European Union. The CEU, created to promote the values of liberal democracy, the rule of law and an open and inclusive society, quickly became a target of Viktor Orbán's government. This case took place in a political context marked by an aggressive campaign led by the Orbán government against George Soros, accused of promoting a liberal and globalist ideology opposed to the conservative and sovereignist values advocated by the ruling party Fidesz. The CEU, perceived as a liberal values stronghold, quickly became a prime target of this offensive. In 2017, the Hungarian government adopted a controversial reform of the higher education law to impose drastic conditions on foreign universities operating in Hungary. One of the most restrictive requirements stipulated that a foreign university could only operate in Hungary if it also organized teaching activities in its country of origin. Although the CEU was accredited in

²⁴ The HUDOC database provides access to the case law of the Court (judgments and decisions of the Grand Chamber, Chambers, and Committees, communicated cases, advisory opinions, and legal summaries extracted from the Information Note on Case Law) and the European Commission of Human Rights (ECHR).

²⁵ See <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#%7B%22itemid%22%3A%22001-95150%22%22%7D>

²⁶ See <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#%7B%22itemid%22%3A%22001-93216%22%22%7D>

²⁷ See https://dial.uclouvain.be/pr/boreal/object/boreal%3A185955/datastream/PDF_01/view

New York State, USA, it did not offer courses there, which made its operation in Hungary illegal under the new legislation. In response to this situation, the European Commission brought proceedings against Hungary before the Court of Justice of the European Union.

However, the CJEU had to overcome a major legal obstacle: the absence of an explicit provision in EU law enshrining academic freedom as a structured and enforceable right. Although mentioned in Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, this freedom is not sufficiently detailed to serve as a direct legal basis. The Court then based its reasoning on the principles of the free internal market and Hungary's international commitments and ruled that the new conditions imposed by Hungarian law unjustifiably restricted access to the market for foreign educational institutions. In its judgment of October 6, 2020 (Case C-66/18), the CJEU found that the Hungarian law violated several fundamental principles of European law, in particular the freedom of establishment and the freedom to provide services (Articles 49 and 56 TFEU). The Court also referred to Hungary's international commitments under the WTO General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), which guarantees market access for educational services. It is encouraging that the CJEU, despite a relatively weak legal framework (the absence of a binding and precise definition of academic freedom), considered it appropriate to incorporate this concept into its decision²⁸.

Despite the university's efforts to comply with Hungarian law, including by establishing teaching activities at Bard College in New York State, the Hungarian government refused to sign the accreditation necessary for it to remain in Budapest, condemning the CEU to forced exile. Despite the CJEU's condemnation of Hungary, the Orbán government has not reinstated CEU in Budapest. In November 2019, the university was forced to move its activities to Vienna, Austria, where it has found refuge. Although it reacted with a delay, the EU had been faced with the need to strengthen its mechanisms to prevent such violations in the future.

Box 1: Founding texts for the Academic Freedom Index, as compiled by the European Parliament

- UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel (1997)
- Rome Ministerial Communiqué on the European Higher Education Area and its annex on academic freedom (2020)
- “*Threats to academic freedom and the autonomy of higher education institutions in Europe*”, report adopted by the Council of Europe (2020)
- The Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research (2020)
- The UNESCO Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers (2017)

²⁸ For a comprehensive analysis of this case, see: <https://www.iee-ulb.eu/blog/cartes-blanches/hongrie-viole-liberte-academique-expulsion-ceu/> Other cases: *Klaus Müller v. Germany* (application rejected in 2020) on the limits of freedom of education in the context of a refusal to assess a university student, and *Akkaya v. Turkey* (2022) on the dismissal of an academic who signed a petition critical of the government.

5. French doctrine

The concept of academic freedom in France is much more recent than in many European countries. “University freedoms” had been the only existing concept conceived in the logic of privileges inherited from the Middle Ages and described above. Academic freedom, the result of custom and practice, had long been doctrinally neglected. “*At the time of the Humboldtian university, the French university (remained) organized as a public administration responsible for vocational education*”: it kept research at a considerable distance²⁹. Indeed, “*the attempt to import the Humboldtian model through the creation of the EPHE in 1868 remained marginal in many respects; it was the founding of the CNRS in 1939, which promised greater independence for scholars, that marked the institutionalization of academic freedom in France*”. What was called “academic freedom” only gradually developed into a doctrine in the 1960s.

Georges Vedel’s approach was instrumental in this regard³⁰. Dean of the Paris Faculty of Law, he believed that the freedoms of the academic community were essentially the result of the university’s self-administration: indeed, it was up to the professors to govern their institution. He held the view that neither the centralization of programs and exams nor that of careers, all a legacy of the Napoleonic Empire, cast doubt on “*the dialectic of ministerial authority and academic freedom*”. However, organic laws alone authorized academics to combine their public office with a parliamentary mandate, implicitly recognizing their independence. Georges Vedel then established a French doctrine on academic freedoms as the set of essentially four personal academic freedoms active within the academic community. Firstly, academics must be able to combine their public office with a parliamentary mandate, thereby emphasizing their independence. Secondly, freedom of opinion allows academics to express themselves freely. Thirdly, academics must enjoy complete freedom during their careers, without external constraints. Finally, the academic profession is based on freedom: freedom to teach and research according to one’s own vision of the truth.

Academic freedoms were only really defined in France with the Higher Education law of November 1968. Also known as the Faure law, it profoundly reformed our higher education system. The “*tyranny of the faculties*” inherited from the Napoleonic University, gave way to multidisciplinary universities, each with their own status, capped by a president elected by all categories of teachers and student representatives. University governance and distribution of powers within each institution were profoundly changed. This law introduced the principle of institutional autonomy and multi-disciplinarity and transformed faculties into teaching/research units. Participation, as a principle, allowed teachers, researchers, students, and supervisory staff to contribute to the governance of institutions.

Having established “*the link between the missions of higher education and the freedoms they require*” through several provisions³¹, the defense of academic freedom within universities is based on Article 33 of the Faure law³² (today L952-2): “*Teachers and researchers shall enjoy full independence and complete freedom of expression in the exercise of their teaching duties*

²⁹ As explained by the Roguess collective: <https://roguessr.fr/liberte-academique/>

³⁰ “*Les libertés universitaires*” (University freedoms), *Revue de l’enseignement supérieur*, 1960, no. 4, pp. 134-139.

³¹ Camille Fernandes, *op. cit.* 2023 <https://doi.org/10.4000/revdh.17965>

³² Article 34 repealed by Order No. 2000-549 of June 15, 2000 - Art. 7 (V).

and research activities, subject, in accordance with academic traditions and the provisions of this law, to respect for the principles of objectivity and tolerance". Academic freedom has two dimensions. On the one hand, there is a defensive (negative) dimension, which aims to protect researchers and teachers from interference, pressure, or censorship. On the other hand, a positive dimension that guarantees the free exercise of research, teaching, and intellectual expression, in accordance with scientific requirements.

The decision of the Constitutional Council on January 20, 1984 (Decision No. 83-165 DC), in which it validated the Savary law on Higher education was another milestone in the recognition of academic freedom. By stating that academic freedom is an essential component of freedom of expression and freedom of teaching, the Constitutional Council confirmed that teachers and researchers enjoy special protection in the exercise of their duties, in accordance with the constitutional principles of freedom of expression and freedom of teaching. It granted constitutional status to academic freedom. Instead of linking academic freedom to freedom of teaching, it linked it to the rights and obligations of teachers and researchers, considered as public officials, while specifying that this status must not impede the right to free communication of thoughts and opinions, as guaranteed by Article 11 of the DDHC.

This principle of independence has been reaffirmed in several decisions (July 1993, August 2010, and December 2020), establishing that the principle of independence applies to all teachers and researchers. The Council of State also stated the principle as a fundamental principle recognized by the laws of the Republic in its May 29, 1992 (Association amicale des professeurs titulaires du Muséum d'histoire naturelle) and March 22, 2000 (M. Ménard req. no. 195639) rulings, to which we will return.

These constitutional principles are echoed in Article L. 952-2 of the Education Code. For French constitutional judges, it is the specific nature of the role of teacher or researcher that requires protection of freedom of expression and personal independence. This is indeed a "specific" right, as Camille Fernandes points out: *"the content of academic freedom alone illustrates its specific nature: the freedoms it comprises are neither those granted to citizens nor those enjoyed by civil servants; they are specific to academics"*³³. This raises the question of the extent of this specificity, which inevitably leads to the fundamental question of the purpose of academic freedom: what is its objective, its role, its *raison d'être*? *"Thus, academic freedom has no other purpose than to enable academics to carry out their teaching and research missions in the service of Higher education and, more broadly, democracy"*³⁴. Outside these functions, their freedom of expression is generally subject to the same constraints as those of other civil servants.

Decree No. 84-431 of June 1984 on the status of teacher-researchers contains the following important provisions:

- Art. 1: reaffirms that teacher-researchers enjoy full freedom of expression in the exercise of their teaching and research duties.

³³ Camille Fernandes, "Academic freedom, a specific freedom?" *Revue des droits de l'homme*, no. 24, 2023, *Libres propos*, <https://doi.org/10.4000/revdh.17965>

³⁴ Camille Fernandes, *opus.cit.*

- Art. 2 and 3: specify the procedures for teacher-researchers recruitment and evaluation, based on scientific and pedagogical criteria. This guarantees their professional independence by strengthening their autonomy *vis-à-vis* external pressures.

In addition, several articles of the Education Code specify the rights and obligations of teacher-researchers and Higher education institutions regarding academic freedom. The Education Code states that the public Higher education service is secular and independent of any political, economic, religious or ideological influence, and strives for objectivity in knowledge, while respecting diversity of opinions.

- Art. L.952-1 establishes that teacher-researchers participate in the public service mission of Higher education and research, within the respect of academic freedoms.
- Art. L.952-2, formerly provided for in Article 34 of the Faure law, constitutes a fundamental pillar of academic freedom: “*Teachers and researchers shall enjoy full independence and complete freedom of expression in the exercise of their teaching duties and research activities, subject to the principles of tolerance and objectivity necessary for the fulfillment of the public service missions of higher education and research*”. This provision was reinforced by the 2021-2030 research program law No. 2020-1674 (December 24, 2020). The amended article specifies: “*Academic freedoms are the guarantee of excellence in Higher education and research. They are exercised in accordance with the values of the Republic.*” This legislative development has strengthened the recognition of academic freedom, establishing it as a fundamental pillar of scientific excellence.
- Art. L.952-3 specifies that teacher-researchers are recruited and evaluated by their peers, a guarantee of their professional autonomy and respect for their academic freedom.
- Art. L.712-3 and L.712-5 define the powers of university boards of directors and academic councils, which participate in the autonomous management of Higher education institutions while respecting academic freedom.

Much like freedom of the press, “academic freedoms” are distinct from freedom of expression, while being closely related. They represent rights and duties exercised by a specific category of people, academics, by virtue of their profession. Academic freedom is primarily aimed at the common good, at the service of a democratic society. It also constitutes an essential guarantee for the exercise of other fundamental rights, such as freedom of opinion and freedom of demonstration, all of which are protected by the Constitution. In this sense, academic freedom is a specific right, comparable to that enjoyed by journalists under the 1881 law on freedom of the press, to which we will return. The link between academic freedom and freedom of expression implies that academics are “*completely free*” to express themselves when teaching and conducting research, while subject to the principles of tolerance, objectivity, and competence. Individual independence guarantees each teacher-researcher protection against all forms of external pressure, whether political, economic, or religious. In France, this protection is largely based on the civil servant status, which ensures a certain stability while nevertheless placing academics in a position of dependence on the public authorities. Other specific guarantees, such as the principle of irrevocableness through tenure for non-civil servant academics, the French equivalent of Anglo-Saxon tenure, or the rules governing careers, fall exclusively within the competence of peers, in accordance with the principle of collegiality. This individual independence is complemented by a collective dimension, which gives teacher-

researchers a form of autonomy in the exercise of their duties as a professional body entrusted with a public service mission.

5.4 Academic freedom and freedom of expression: dividing lines and areas of overlap

While freedom of expression is an essential pillar of individual academic freedom, both are obviously not identical. As the lawyer and academic Olivier Beaud likes to point out, freedom of expression in academia “*does not mean the freedom to say anything and everything.*” It is based on the presumed academic quality of the opinions expressed by experts in their fields and their potential contribution to the public interest, which justifies a particularly high level of protection.

This protection remains relatively limited in scope in France. It extends only to “*the freedom to hold and express any belief, opinion or theoretical position, and to do so in an academically appropriate manner*” as stated by Jogchum Vrielink, Paul and Koen Lemmens in their April 2023 *Challenges to Academic Freedom as a Fundamental Right* report.

Specific to the speech of academics, academic freedom of expression implies a genuine “right to be wrong”: the mere fact that a scientific opinion may prove to be inaccurate, or even that it is demonstrated to be so, is not grounds enough to deprive it of the high degree of protection it enjoys. The question here ties into the relationship with the truth, based on the respect due to the rigorous method in accessing to the truth itself. This method necessarily involves testing hypotheses, some of which may one day be refuted. The key is to distinguish between facts and opinions, between convictions and objectifiable knowledge, which is the result of methodical reasoning based on the state of knowledge at a given moment. In France, academic freedom must also be exercised in accordance with certain fundamental values, such as neutrality and “republican values”, the definition of which can be a source of ideological tension. The 2020 Research Program law specifically states that this freedom must be exercised in accordance with the principles of secularism and equality. At the very least, this implies the practice of pluralism, tolerance, objectivity, and inclusion, as well as the rejection of all forms of discrimination in academic practices.

The public expression of opinions by teacher-researchers in France has been the subject of heated debate in recent years, particularly on sensitive topics such as COVID-19, international scientific collaboration (with China, Russia, Israel, and the United States, among others), and student protests. In a letter dated December 26, 2023, the Minister of Higher Education and Research referred the matter to the Ethics Committee for an opinion. In response, the College adopted an opinion on March 29, 2024, in which it recommended, among other things, the development of a charter on the public expression of faculty members. This charter aims to provide a framework for academics' public statements, emphasizing respect for academic traditions and the principles of tolerance and objectivity, and avoiding references to their institution when speaking outside their field of expertise.

Recent French legal precedents tend to reinforce academic freedom of expression, while recalling its ethical and statutory limits. The administrative courts over the past five years have recognized the protection of this freedom over the principle of neutrality, even in times of social or political tension, and the need to distinguish between rigorously argued academic opinion and statements that constitute proselytism or invective. Obviously, this freedom can only be exercised within a responsible and ethical framework: teachers and researchers are required to

express their views in accordance with the standards of rigor inherent to their scientific mission, their status, and their ethical obligations.

Box 2: Freedom of expression for staff at public research institutions: a regulated right.

1. A right protected by several fundamental texts:

-The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) and the European Convention on Human Rights (Art. 10);

-The Education Code (Art. L952-2) for teachers and researchers;

-The Research Code (Art. L411-1) for staff at public research institutions.

2. A freedom exercised within a framework of responsibilities comprising:

-Objectivity, neutrality, probity and loyalty, in accordance with the law of April 20, 2016, on the duties of civil servants;

-Respect for professional confidentiality;

-Prohibition of defamatory or disparaging remarks.

5.5 Freedom of expression and professional ethics

Three recent examples of different kinds illustrate this requirement. The first is a November 15, 2022, Council of State decision in which it overturned a sanction issued by the president of a university against a senior lecturer for failing to “appease” tensions during a student demonstration. The Council of State recalled that academic freedom of expression, protected by Article L. 952-2 of the Education Code, takes precedence over the duty of neutrality, insofar as the comments or attitudes in question were made in the course of professional duties. It specified that “*teachers and researchers [...] enjoy full independence and complete freedom of expression in the exercise of their duties [...], subject to the restrictions imposed on them [...] by the principles of tolerance and objectivity*” (CE, 2022). Furthermore, under the terms of Article L. 952-2 of the Education Code: “*Teachers-researchers, teachers, and researchers enjoy full independence and complete freedom of expression in the exercise of their teaching duties and research activities, subject to the restrictions imposed on them, in accordance with university traditions and the provisions of this code, by the principles of tolerance and objectivity*”³⁵.

The second case is the so-called “Montpellier faculty commando” case (2018–2024). In this case, Professor Jean-Luc Coronel de Boissezon, associate professor of law, was permanently dismissed for participating in the violent evacuation of a lecture hall occupied by striking students in March 2018. The Council of State ruled that these actions undermined academic

³⁵ See <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/ceta/id/CETATEXT000046565137>

dignity and the values of public service, justifying the most severe penalty provided for in the Education Code. The Council overturned two decisions by the CNESER (National Council for Higher Education and Research), deemed too lenient. It reiterated that active participation in premeditated violence was in no way a form of protected academic expression. The disciplinary section of the Sorbonne University Academic Council dismissed the professor and banned him from holding any position in a public institution. The CNESER, ruling on disciplinary matters on appeal, reduced the penalty in March 2022 to a four-year ban on teaching or conducting research in any public Higher education institution, with full loss of salary. The Minister of Higher Education and Research and the University of Montpellier considered this sanction insufficient and referred the matter to the Council of State. In its decision, the Council of State found that the investigation confirmed Jean-Luc Coronel de Boissezon's participation in the events. It emphasized the July 2, 2021, judgment of the Montpellier Criminal Court, that had stated that the violence committed during the gathering was premeditated and that the teacher-researcher was directly involved in the events that took place on university grounds. The Council of State recalled that the teacher-researcher had already been convicted in the past for acts of violence. The criminal court therefore sentenced him to fourteen months' imprisonment with an eight-month suspension, and an additional penalty of disqualification from any public office or employment for a period of one year. In its decision, the Council of State pointed out that the Education Code provides for seven levels of disciplinary sanctions. With this in view, it considered that the sanction imposed by the CNESER, at the fifth level of possible sanctions, was too lenient in relation to the seriousness of the acts. Finally, after a six-year legal saga, the Council of State imposed the most severe penalty on the disciplinary scale. In this case, the Council of State twice overturned the decision handed down by the disciplinary session CNESER ruling.

The third case refers to the follow up of a referral from the Minister of Higher Education, the Higher Education Ethics Committee (“which, moreover, bases its deliberations on its opinions of May 21, 2021, on academic freedoms and February 17, 2023, on the public expression of researchers”) issued an opinion in March 2024 reiterating that freedom of expression is (...) an essential element of individual academic freedom³⁶. “Academic” freedom of expression is based on the (presumed) quality of the opinion and its (potential) contribution to the general interest, marking its important difference with the generic freedom of expression. It must then enjoy a particularly high level of protection. However, this protection is limited in scope: it only covers “the freedom to hold and express any belief, opinion or theoretical position and to espouse it in an academically appropriate manner,” as reported in *Challenges to academic freedom as a fundamental right*³⁷.

Box 3: “Opinion of the Ethics Committee for Higher Education and Research on Academic Freedom” (May 21, 2021)³⁸

In March 2021, in the face of what was perceived as the rise of ideological radicalism undermining academic freedom in France, the Minister of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation referred to the Ethics Committee to clarify the ethical principles promoting

³⁶ *Opus.cit.*: <https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/fr/bo/2024/Hebdo18/ESRH2407278V>

³⁷ *Opus.cit.*: https://www.leru.org/files/Publications/2023.04.27_Challenges-to-academic-freedom-as-a-fundamental-right.pdf (April 2023)

³⁸ See <https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/2022-01/avis-du-21-mai-2021-relatif-aux-libert-s-acad-miques-15895.pdf>

academic dignity, impartiality, scientific integrity, and intellectual probity. The minister also sought proposals for organizing the coordination of ethics officers, scientific integrity officers, and whistleblowers in institutions, as well as their coordination with the Committee at the national level.

The National Deontology Charter for Research Professions (2015/2019)³⁹ specifies that freedom of expression is exercised within the legal framework of the civil service, with an obligation of discretion, neutrality, and transparency of interests, and requires a clear distinction between scientific expertise and opinion. In terms of ethics, academic freedom is exercised in a spirit of tolerance, openness to debate, respect for pluralism, and methodological rigor and scientific integrity to prevent conflicts of interest. Teachers and researchers enjoy complete freedom in their choice of subjects and reasoned opinions, but must in return respect the dignity of others, courtesy, and collective rules, particularly in peer review.

Scientific debate must be respectful, pluralistic, and organized in such a way as to preserve scientific integrity and public order, the latter falling under the head of the institution. Any serious breach may result in disciplinary or even criminal sanctions (e.g., an academic article denying the Holocaust sanctioned by the Council of State).

To guarantee these principles, the College emphasizes coordination between the various local and national bodies through scientific integrity officers, ethics officers, and whistleblower officers. Institutions are required to appoint these officers (law of April 20, 2016, circular letter of 2017), who may be grouped together within the same body. These structures must be able to be called upon quickly in the event of difficulties related to the exercise of academic freedom. The local representative may refer complex cases to the College for advice, support, or national handling.

Finally, the responsibility for ensuring respect for academic freedom ultimately lies with the president or director of the institution, who has the necessary prerogatives and may refer cases to the competent courts if necessary.

Since its institutionalization in the early 19th century, the modalities of application of the principle of academic freedom may differ according to legal and institutional traditions. But the principle has remained inseparable, for teachers and researchers, from the shared view of the university as a privileged place for free thought, based on the cardinal values of humanity, critical rationality, and intellectual pluralism. This stands in stark contrast to the scientific or techno-nationalist approach, which views the pursuit of knowledge as an instrument of power, of any kind, in the service of a predefined truth and power grab. Academic freedom is today conceived as a professional freedom granted to academics by virtue of their belonging to an academic institution, conceived as a structured community of knowledge. This institution is defined by intellectual, ethical and organizational rules and standards, with specific procedures and practices, developed and evaluated by peers (through the academic senate, scientific council or evaluation committee, among others), according to academic disciplines. Academic integrity rules the behavior of teacher-researchers in their work and sanctions cases of fraud, plagiarism, and abuse. Professional ethics covers working relationships within the university, while

³⁹ French Charter of Ethics for Research Professions, January 2015 (ratifications as of January 22, 2019), <https://comite-ethique.cnrs.fr/charte/> <https://comite-ethique.cnrs.fr/charte/>

scientific ethics focuses on the consequences of academic practice beyond the boundaries of the university, often on sensitive or controversial topics, which may vary over time or from one society to another.

5.6 Academic freedom and university autonomy: other divisions and areas of overlap

In France, university autonomy is often seen as a central element of academic freedom. The law on the freedoms and responsibilities of universities (“LRU law”, August 2007) aimed to strengthen the budgetary and governance autonomy of higher education institutions. The Ministry of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation (MESRI), aimed at enhancing the universities attractiveness, breaking the “paralysis of governance,” and strengthening their visibility in global rankings. The law profoundly changed the way universities operate, introducing new responsibilities (human resources management, real estate management, budget control), revising the role of governance councils, and strengthening the powers of university presidents. Yet, the LRU provoked particularly mixed reactions. Numerous student and teacher unions strongly opposed it as a sign of the state's gradual disengagement and the introduction of a neoliberal management approach imported from the American and globalized “New Public Management” model. A majority in the Conference of University Presidents (CPU) supported the reform in an opinion piece published in *Le Monde*, defending a “*new momentum*” that would bring “*decisive progress*” for French higher education. Critics of the law firmly denounced the instrumentalization of the principle of university autonomy, under the guise of emancipation. In their view, the LRU served as a vehicle for transferring responsibilities without any compensatory measures, creating conditions that would weaken universities. This divide reveals a structural misunderstanding still visible today. For the public authorities, the budgetary and managerial autonomy of universities is a guarantee of greater academic freedom. For many of its detractors, it conceals a strategic disengagement by the state, transferring responsibilities without a corresponding transfer of resources.

This misunderstanding is rooted in an unresolved tension between management autonomy and increased state regulation. As highlighted in an article in the *Revue française d'administration publique* (2019): “*The LRU law is part of a continuum of legislative and regulatory changes aimed at giving higher education institutions greater management autonomy while maintaining or developing state regulation, which is all the more unpopular with certain stakeholders because it affects them more closely*”. The role of the rector (budget controller, guarantor of fairness and efficiency in student postings) is thus reaffirmed and amplified. The authors conclude that “French-style” autonomy is struggling to find a balance between the central level and the components of institutions, often relegated to a secondary role in this new mode of governance.

Since its implementation, the LRU has brought about an undeniable transformation of universities but has not resolved the initial imbalances. While some institutions have been able to take advantage of the new room for maneuver (through partnerships, site policies, and educational innovation), others have faced increased budgetary constraints, administrative overload, and excessive centralization of governance. Several reports, including those of the Court of Auditors (2011, 2016) and the LRU Monitoring Committee, have highlighted the limitations of the exercise. This tension between management autonomy and state regulation has persisted in the most recent measures taken, particularly, with the experimental public institutions (EPEs). Established December 12, 2018, these institutions allow universities, *grandes écoles*, and research organizations to experiment new forms of collaboration, grouping,

or merger for a maximum period of ten years. The stated objective is to strengthen their influence at the national, international, and regional levels by offering greater statutory autonomy within the legal framework of public scientific, cultural, and professional institutions (EPSCP).

What matters to us here are the persistent tensions surrounding the very meaning of autonomy in universities. What should theoretically be a leverage for academic freedom should not merely become an instrument of competition. In a November 2024 article in the *Actualité juridique droit académique* (AJDA) entitled “*Experimental public institutions: statutory autonomy vs academic freedom*”⁴⁰, lawyer Camille Fernandes points out that the founding ordinance of 2018 “*does not provide compatible solutions or rules*” to fully reconcile governance autonomy with guarantees of academic freedom. She notes that the ordinance “*sets few limits*” and leaves the drafters of EPE statutes with considerable freedom in defining institutional balances. While this margin for experimentation may encourage managerial innovation, it can also undermine several republican university foundations.

The study highlights a gradual dilution of the principle of collegiality, which is at the heart of traditional university governance. For example, peer review of recruitment and academic careers, much like the principle of collegial governance, are not rigorously applied in several EPEs. Furthermore, although subject to the provisions of the Education Code common to all EPSCPs, these institutions may see a decrease in the proportion of teacher-researchers in their decision-making bodies. Some EPE resort to advisory bodies composed of external figures belonging to the academic world but lacking representation from the university communities concerned. In the absence of a solid regulatory framework, institutional autonomy can result in entrepreneurial-style governance, where the logic of efficiency, performance, and international academic standardization tends to prevail over the principles of intellectual freedom and scientific responsibility.

In conclusion, and somewhat provocatively, the reality on the ground gives the impression that our universities are based on the principle of academic freedom as if it were self-evident and did not require any special protection. However, the French case illustrates the limitations of a model in which academic freedom has only recently been recognized as a higher founding principle, and only on an *ad hoc* basis. It was neither intrinsically considered as a condition for scientific excellence, nor could be massively challenged by public authorities. The academic system was not designed to protect itself or to transform this freedom into a effective strength. Yet, once it is under attack, ensuring respect for academic freedom becomes extremely difficult, even if most stakeholders act with the best of intentions

III The global decline of Academic freedom

We have used the few available tools to first provide an overview of academic freedom around the world, before shifting our analysis to the specific situation in France. The maps presented cross-reference general freedom indicators with those of academic freedom, highlight their intertwining, and reveal a clear global decline. Secondly, we examine its structural causes.

⁴⁰ Camille Fernandes, *Établissements publics expérimentaux : autonomie statutaire vs liberté académique* (Experimental public institutions : statutory autonomy vs academic freedom) AJDA - Actualité juridique Droit administratif (Legal news - Administrative law), 2021, p. 1845 *et seq.* Article also referenced in the AEF of January 9, 2025 - dispatch no. 723194, Caroline Laires Tavares.

3. Insufficient measurement indicators

To date, we only have a few quantitative indicators that allow us to take a snapshot and broadly map the international situation of academic freedom. These instruments need improvement, and it seems more necessary than ever to develop new ones. We will return to this point later. Some reports are notable for their lack of systematicity, due to irregular or episodic publication. Other approaches address the issue only indirectly, placing it within the broader framework of Human rights (such as the reports of Freedom House or the *United Nations Universal Periodic Review*), which tend to blur the specific analysis of academic freedom. Finally, some methodologies focus solely on the most serious violations, with a view to compare countries (such as the Academic Freedom Index). This approach potentially leads to an oversimplification of national realities.

As highlighted in the European report *How academic freedom is monitored. Overview of methods and procedures*⁴¹, now considered a reference document: “*in truth, there is currently no systematic evaluation method or procedure that allows for a specific and rigorous analysis of the situation of academic freedom in the Member States of the European Union*”. The European Higher Education Area, like the European Commission, therefore, plans to strengthen the monitoring and promotion of this freedom in the coming years.

It should be noted that the reports on the situation in 2025 will not be published until the end of 2025. The specific situation in the United States, has not yet been documented quantitatively. For this reason, qualitative elements from research and interviews conducted in different national contexts enrich and complement this overview.

4. Assessing academic freedom: a complex yet achievable undertaking

Assessing academic freedom is a complex undertaking for several reasons: academic freedom is a multidimensional concept; there may be a gap between the legal status (*de jure*) and the actual reality (*de facto*) of academic freedom; disparities are common within the same country, depending on the sector or institution; many actors (states, businesses, public opinion, the academic world itself) can influence or compromise this freedom; beyond obvious and direct infringements, discreet, insidious forms, such as self-censorship or corrupt practices, are particularly difficult to detect.

To identify the common elements that constitute academic freedom, the work of the European Parliament (STUDY Panel for the Future of Science and Technology) bases its analyses on the following documents:

- UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel (1997);
- Rome Ministerial Communiqué on the European Higher Education and Research Area and its annex on academic freedom (2020);

⁴¹ How is academic freedom monitored? Overview of methods and procedures: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/740228/EPRS_STU\(2023\)740228_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/740228/EPRS_STU(2023)740228_EN.pdf)

- report adopted by the Council of Europe on threats to academic freedom and the autonomy of higher education institutions in Europe (2020);
- Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research (2020);
- UNESCO Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers (2017).

Analyses and recommendations from specialized professional communities are also considered and include the “*Academic Freedom, a Fundamental Right*” policy paper adopted by the League of European Research Universities (2010) and the “*Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*” of the American Association of University Professors (2015), a major reference in academic literature. The “academic freedom support” indicators are those that protect its essential foundations. Their absence does not necessarily imply a violation, but it does make it considerably more difficult to prevent infringements.

In its annual report, the European Parliament relies on ten main evaluation methods and procedures:

- comparative analysis of regulatory frameworks;
- Academic Freedom Index (AFI);
- European University Association's University Autonomy Scoreboard;
- Academic Freedom Monitoring Project conducted by Scholars at Risk;
- Freedom House's “*Freedom in the World*” (FIW) report;
- surveys of academics;
- case studies conducted by national experts;
- *United Nations Universal Periodic Review* (UPR) on Human rights;
- Joint ILO/UNESCO Committee of Experts on the Application of the Recommendations concerning Teaching Personnel (CEART);
- Institutional surveys by the Committee on Academic Freedom of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP).

The European Parliament's Academic Freedom Monitor 2024 (EUP AFM) provides a scores and results summary relating to academic freedom for each of the European Union member states, based on selected observatories. It is an update of the national reports published in the summary section of the European Parliament's Academic Freedom Monitor 2023 based on four indicators, detailed as follows.

The Academic Freedom Index (AFI) is a composite index launched in 2020 and updated annually. It was developed by the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) and the Institute of Political Science at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU), in collaboration with the V-

Dem Institute (Varieties of Democracy) and the Scholars at Risk Network under the direction of Janika Spannagel. It now covers over 180 countries. The index itself is based on five key indicators, assessed by academic experts using V-Dem's rigorous methodology: (1) freedom of research and teaching, i.e., the ability of researchers to freely define their subjects, methods, and results; (2) freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, including opportunities for national and international collaboration without excessive restrictions; (3) institutional autonomy, which measures the independence of institutions from political authorities or other external pressures; (4) campus integrity, understood as the physical and symbolic protection of university spaces (from law enforcement, the military, or violent groups); and (5) academic and cultural freedom of expression, which guarantees academics the right to express themselves freely, including on political or societal issues.

These indicators are coded by country and year on a scale of 0 to 4, starting in 1900, and aggregated into an index ranging from 0 to 1. The database used for this report is version 14 of V-Dem. It is important to note that experts reassess academic freedom in their countries yearly, which may result in slight variations in scores between updates. For instance, the score assigned to a country in 2021 in the AFI 2024 update may differ slightly from that presented in the initial AFI report for 2021. The overall academic freedom score in the AFI ranges from 0 to 1, with 0 equaling a total lack of respect for academic freedom and 1 meaning complete respect. Scores for other categories range from 0 to 4, with 0 being the lowest level.

The second index, the EUA Autonomy Scorecard (2019-2023), is a comparative *de jure* analysis of institutional autonomy within European higher education systems. Institutional autonomy is recognized as an essential condition for guaranteeing academic freedom⁴². This latest edition provides an analysis of 35 European systems, with an unprecedented study of the legal protections of academic freedom in national legislation.

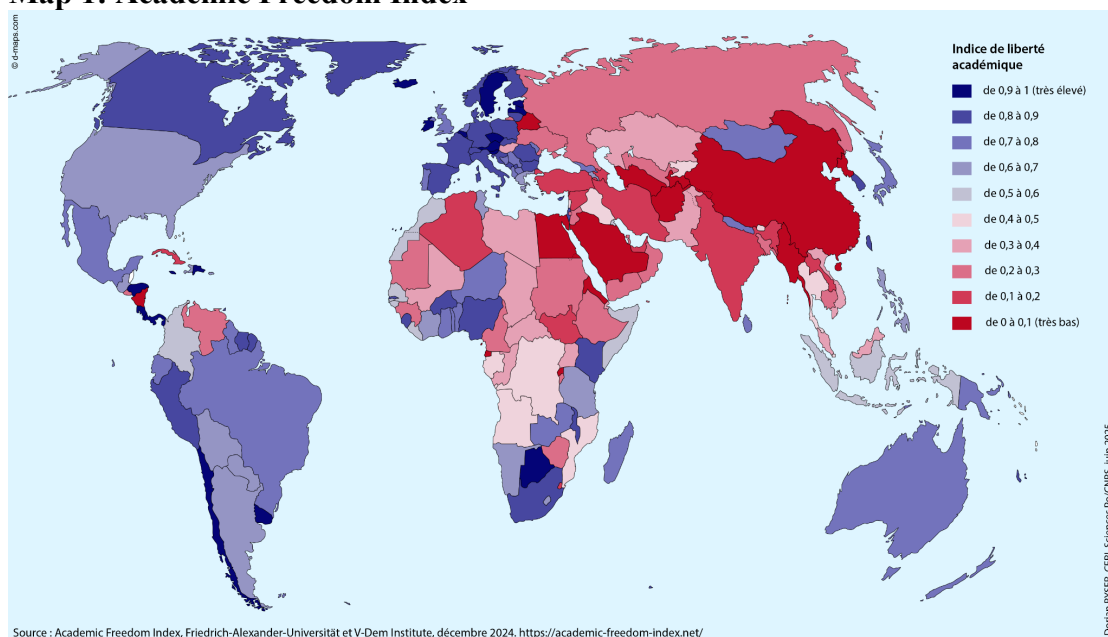
The third index is the Freedom in the World Report (1975-2025) (Freedom House), which offers a comparative global overview of political rights and civil liberties, combining quantitative indicators and narrative analysis. Countries are assessed by external analysts using a wide range of sources validated by regional experts: press articles, academic studies, reports from non-governmental organizations, professional contacts, and field research.

The fourth index is the Academic Freedom Monitoring Project (Scholars at Risk/SAR). Since 2015, The data published annually since 2015 by the SAR association in the “*Free to Think*” report has been based on the following objective: report all attacks against Higher education communities around the world. It is a database of serious incidents affecting academic freedom or the Human rights of university communities. Only cases of severe repression are included, such as murders, violence, disappearances, unjustified detentions or trials, travel restrictions, dismissals or expulsions in retaliation, as well as any other major event affecting the higher education community.

⁴² See Maassen *et al.*, 2023.

THE STATE OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM AROUND THE WORLD IN MAPS

Map 1: Academic Freedom Index



1

Academic freedom indicators

- from 0.9 to 1 (very high)
- from 0.8 to 0.9
- from 0.7 to 0.8
- from 0.6 to 0.7
- from 0.5 to 0.6
- from 0.4 to 0.5
- from 0.3 to 0.4
- from 0.2 to 0.3
- from 0.1 to 0.2
- from 0 to 0.1 (very low)

2

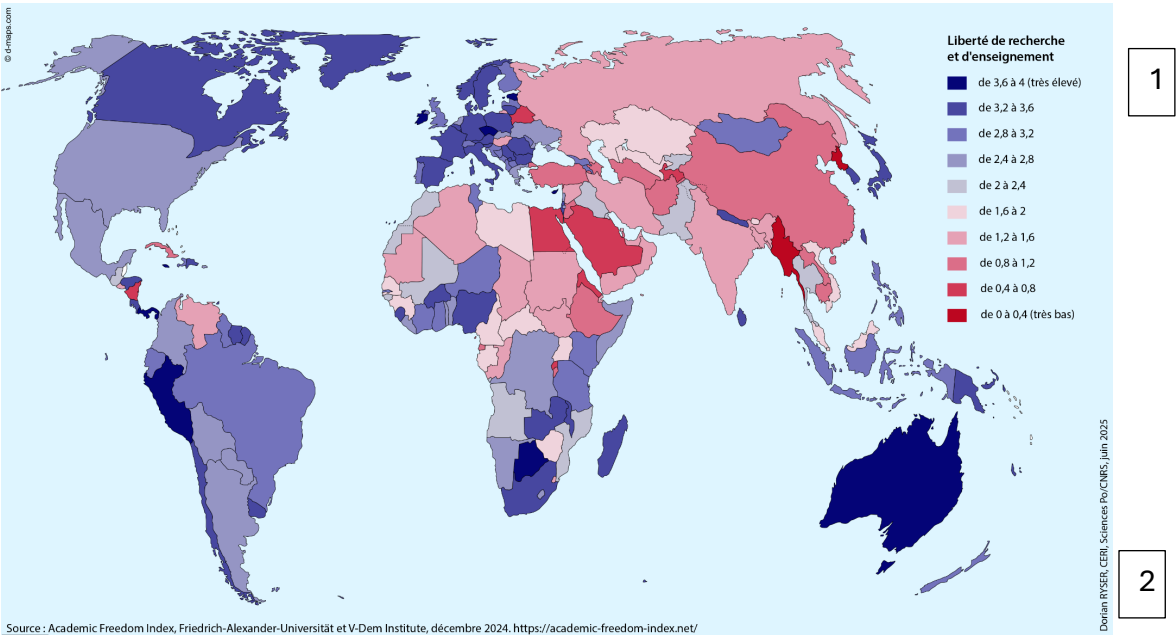
Source: Academic Freedom Index, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität and V-Dem Institute, December 2024. <https://academic-freedom-index.net/>

3

Dorian RYSER, CERI, Science Po/CNRS, June 2025

This index is based on assessments by 2,363 national experts from around the world and evaluates academic freedom in 179 countries using five indicators: freedom of research and teaching (map 2); freedom of academic exchange and dissemination (map 3); institutional autonomy (map 4); campus integrity (map 5); academic and cultural freedom of expression (map 6)⁴³⁴⁴.

Map 2: Teaching and Researching Freedom, Academic Freedom Index (AFI)



3

- 1

Teaching and Researching Freedom indicators

 - from 3.6 to 4 (very high)
 - from 3.2 to 3.6
 - from 2.8 to 3.2
 - from 2.4 to 2.8
 - from 2 to 2.4
 - from 1.6 to 2
 - from 1.2 to 1.6
 - from 0.8 to 1.2
 - from 0.4 to 0.8
 - from 0 to 0.4 (very low)

2

Dorian RYSER, CERI, Science Po/CNRS, June 2025

⁴³ On further information on the design of the index, see [The Academic Freedom Index and Its indicators: Introduction to new global time-series V-Dem data](#) (Spannagel, J., Kinzelbach, K., 2023)

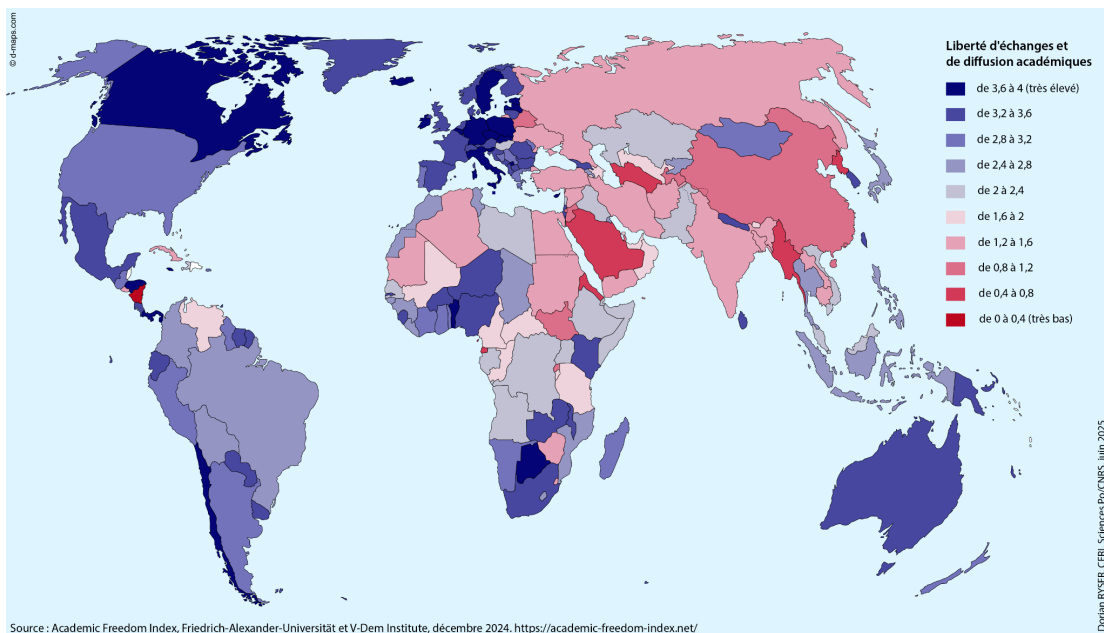
⁴⁴ This reality has already been documented in: <https://insanhaklariokulu.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/A-Report-on-Academic-Freedoms-in-Turkey.pdf> ; https://www.researchgate.net/publication/365383126_Academic_Freedom_in_Turkey

3

Source: Academic Freedom Index, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität and V-Dem Institute, December 2024. <https://academic-freedom-index.net/>

This indicator measures the degree of autonomy researchers enjoy defining, conducting, and developing their research and teaching activities without external interference.

Map 3: Freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, Academic Freedom Index (AFI)



3

1

Academic exchange and dissemination indicators

- from 3.6 to 4 (very high)
- from 3.2 to 3.6
- from 2.8 to 3.2
- from 2.4 to 2.8
- from 2 to 2.4
- from 1.6 to 2
- from 1.2 to 1.6
- from 0.8 to 1.2
- from 0.4 to 0.8
- from 0 to 0.4 (very low)

2

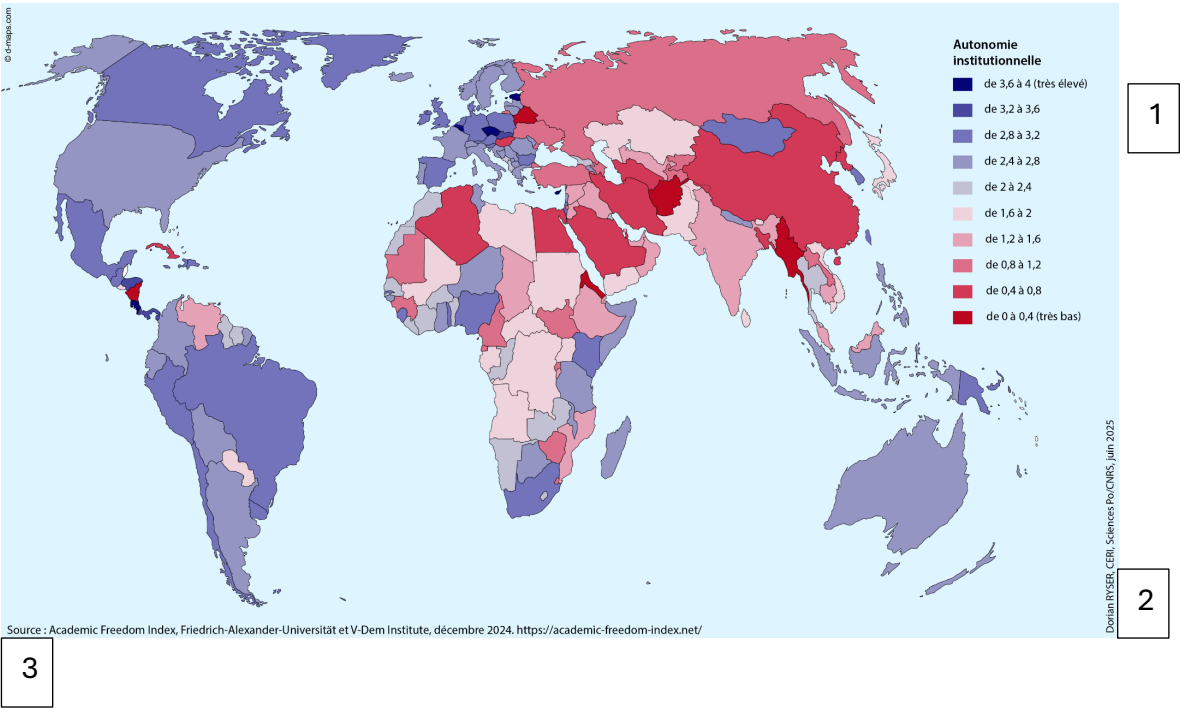
Dorian RYSER, CERi, Science Po/CNRS, June 2025

3

Source: Academic Freedom Index, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität and V-Dem Institute, December 2024. <https://academic-freedom-index.net/>

This indicator assesses the extent to which researchers are free to exchange and communicate ideas and research findings with academic and non-academic audiences.

Map 4: Institutional autonomy indicator, Academic Freedom Index (AFI)



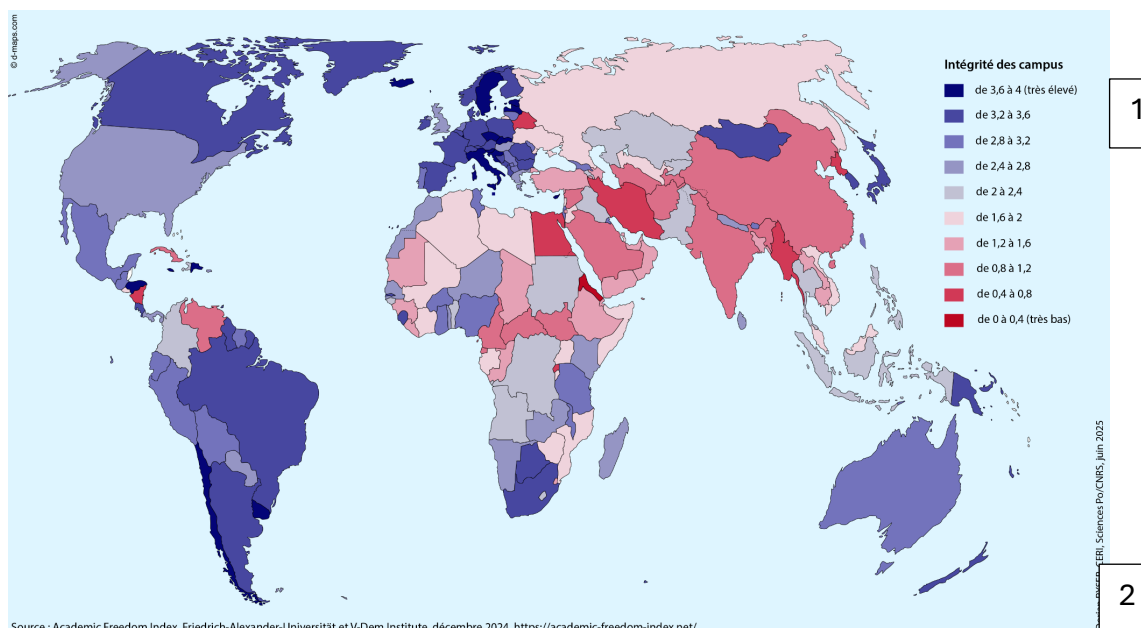
- 1
- Institutional autonomy indicator**
from 3.6 to 4 (very high)
from 3.2 to 3.6
from 2.8 to 3.2
from 2.4 to 2.8
from 2 to 2.4
from 1.6 to 2
from 1.2 to 1.6
from 0.8 to 1.2
from 0.4 to 0.8
from 0 to 0.4 (very low)

- 2
- Dorian RYSER, CERI, Science Po/CNRS, June 2025

- 3
- Source: Academic Freedom Index, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität and V-Dem Institute, December 2024. <https://academic-freedom-index.net/>

This indicator assesses the extent to which universities exercise their institutional autonomy in practice to remain in control of decisions concerning their internal governance, finances, administration, research choices, and results.

Map 5: “Campus integrity” indicator, Academic Freedom Index (AFI)



3

1

“Campus integrity” indicator

from 3.6 to 4 (very high)
 from 3.2 to 3.6
 from 2.8 to 3.2
 from 2.4 to 2.8
 from 2 to 2.4
 from 1.6 to 2
 from 1.2 to 1.6
 from 0.8 to 1.2
 from 0.4 to 0.8
 from 0 to 0.4 (very low)

2

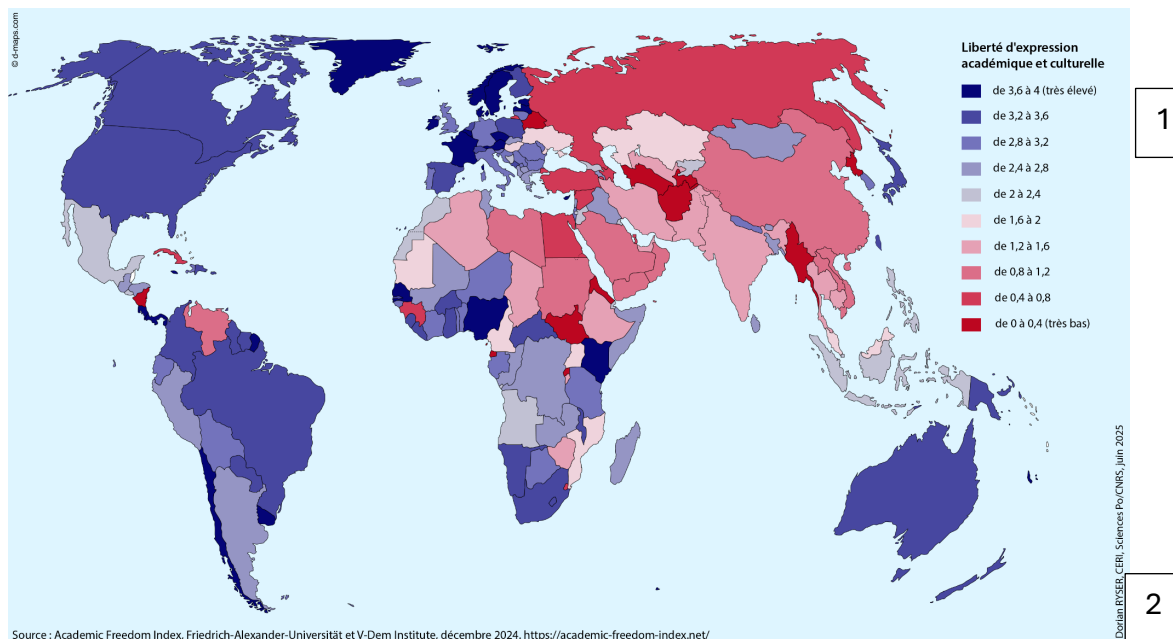
Dorian RYSER, CERI, Science Po/CNRS, June 2025

3

Source: Academic Freedom Index, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität and V-Dem Institute, December 2024. <https://academic-freedom-index.net/>

This indicator assesses the extent to which campuses (defined as all university buildings and digital research and teaching platforms) are free from external political surveillance or security breaches.

Map 6: “Academic and cultural freedom of expression” indicator, Academic Freedom Index (AFI)



3

1

“Academic and cultural freedom of expression” indicator

from 3.6 to 4 (very high)
 from 3.2 to 3.6
 from 2.8 to 3.2
 from 2.4 to 2.8
 from 2 to 2.4
 from 1.6 to 2
 from 1.2 to 1.6
 from 0.8 to 1.2
 from 0.4 to 0.8
 from 0 to 0.4 (very low)

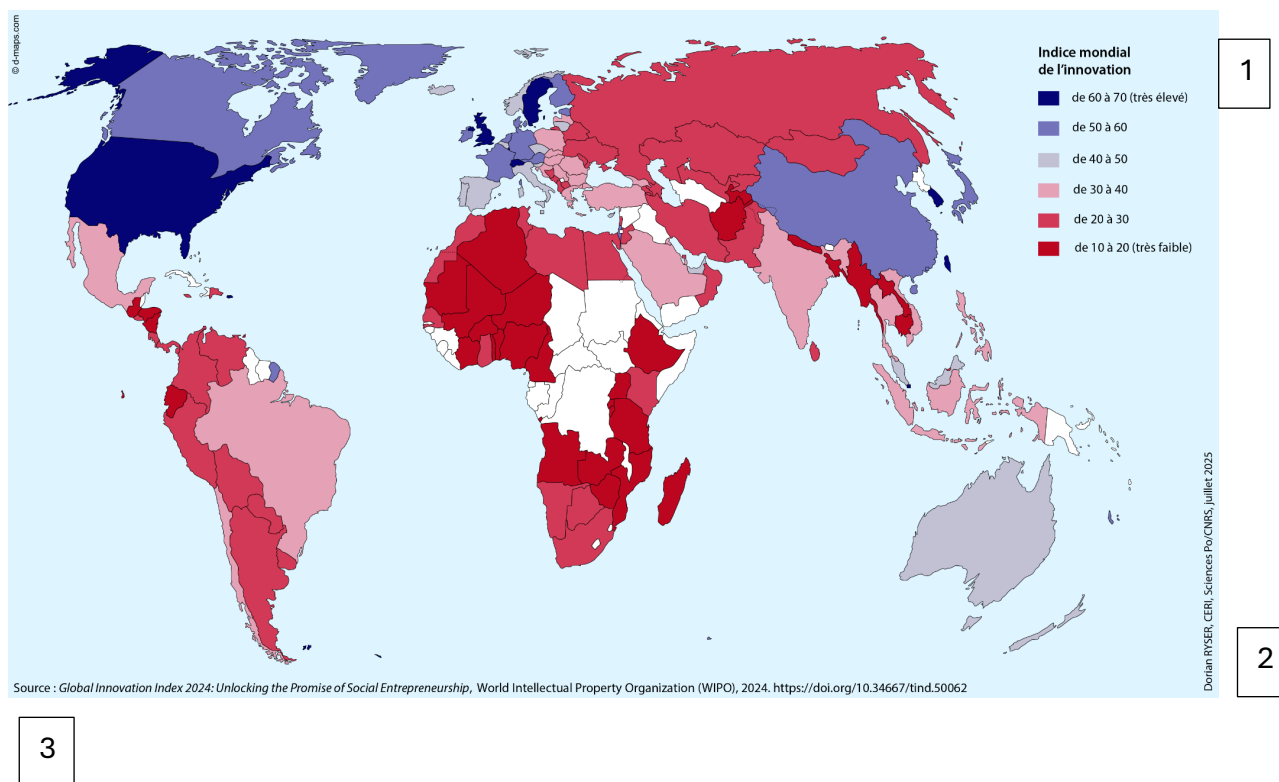
2

Dorian RYSER, CERI, Science Po/CNRS, June 2025

3

Source: Academic Freedom Index, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität and V-Dem Institute, December 2024. <https://academic-freedom-index.net/>

Map 7: Global Innovation Index (GII 2024), WIPO.

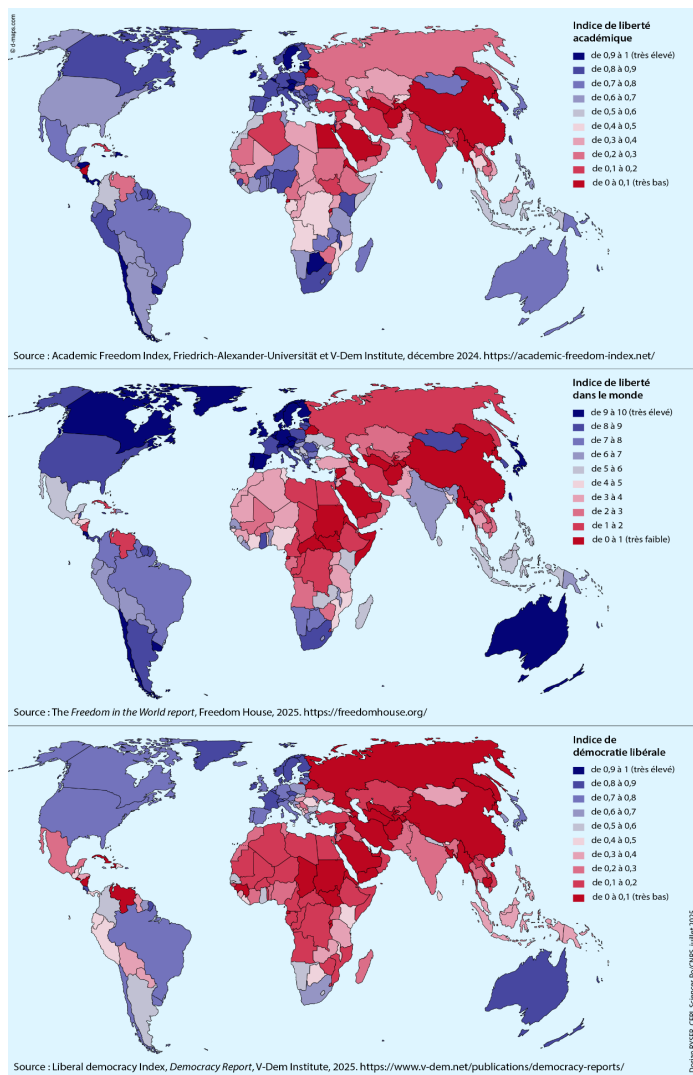


1 **Global Innovation Index**
 from 60 to 70 (very high)
 from 50 to 60
 from 40 to 50
 from 30 to 40
 from 20 to 30
 from 10 to 20 (very low)

2 Dorian RYSER, CERI, Science Po/CNRS, June 2025

3 Source: Global Innovation Index 2024: Unlocking the Promise of Social Entrepreneurship, World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), 2024. <https://doi.org/10.34667/tind.50062>

Map 8: Cartographic comparison between the Academic Freedom Index (AFI), the Freedom in the World Index (Freedom House), and the Liberal Democracy Index (V-Dem Institute) 2023-24



5. Over half of the world is a “blank zone” for research

When the first indicators were established in 2005, three distinct groups of countries were easily identified:

- a group with high scores, which remained relatively stable until 2015, consisting mainly of countries from liberal and/or Western democracies;
- an intermediate group of countries with cutting-edge scientific ecosystems and strong, sometimes rapidly expanding academic output, but with authoritarian or increasingly authoritarian political regimes: India, Russia, Turkey and Indonesia;
- a low scores group with, which included China, Tunisia, and Egypt.

Twenty years later, this simple structure appears blurred: the scores are now more heterogeneous. We are witnessing the formation of a more diffuse group, in which the former high-scoring countries, most of which are now slightly down, converge with the intermediate group countries. Concomitantly, the low-scoring countries group is growing, as a direct consequence of the marked deterioration in academic freedom in previously better positioned countries, such as Hungary, India, Russia, Israel, and Turkey.

Let us now attempt to analyze the situation by major region. “*While academic freedom in the United States is in danger, the phenomenon is (in reality) global,*” warns sociologist Michel Dubois⁴⁵. Academic freedom can be compromised in both authoritarian regimes and democracies. Depending on the context only the means employed, and the underlying logic differ. The latest SAR report from 2024 confirms the studies cited above by highlighting situations deemed serious in 18 countries and territories (for very different, even incomparable, context dependent reasons), notably in: Afghanistan, China, Colombia, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Iran, Israel, Nicaragua, Nigeria, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Russia, Turkey, Sudan, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States. “Free to Think 2024” documents exactly 391 attacks against academics, students, or institutions in 51 countries and territories from July 2023 to June 2024. The report highlights “*a worrying trend of declining academic freedom worldwide*”. Recent data from the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) reveals that over half of the world's population lives in regions where academic freedom is either ‘completely’ or “severely” restricted. Furthermore, some of the most alarming situations are found in emerging regional scientific ecosystems (Brazil, Turkey, Egypt, India, Saudi Arabia, etc.). Overall, the trend indicates a significant decline in academic freedom, with only 10 out of 179 countries assessed showing improvement in this area, even if most democratic regimes are affected by this concern. The American issue is acutely severe because it affects the world's leading scientific power, the oldest constitutional democracy, and one of the most influential academic systems in the global scientific architecture.

The graph for the Asia-Pacific region highlights a steady and sharp decline in India's score since Narendra Modi and the BJP came to power⁴⁶. This downward trend also affects most other countries in the region (Singapore, China, including Hong Kong, but also Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Thailand). Notable exceptions are Japan and South Korea, which have seen an improvement in their previously surprisingly low 2005 scores, given their strong democratic and academic tradition.

In the Africa-Middle East region, the national trajectories of universities accurately reflect political developments in the region.

In sub-Saharan Africa, according to UniRank data⁴⁷, the access to university rate is around 6% of the eligible young adult population, compared to nearly 80% in OECD countries. Based on an estimated regional population of 1.2 billion in 2025, this would amount to nearly 72 million potential students. The continent had 2,389 universities in 2023, compared to around 1,225 in 2020, illustrating the rapid expansion of Higher education. Despite this growth, academic freedom in sub-Saharan Africa remains largely understudied, even though it is essential to the production of critical knowledge in a context marked by the gradual creation of regional academic ecosystems.

A recent analysis of the 2004-2022 period was conducted by Kwaku K. Adu and Joseph Odame (2023)⁴⁸, two specialists in educational issues on the African continent. Published in the *International Journal of Educational Development*, it reviews the literature on academic

⁴⁵ See <https://www.sorbonne-universite.fr/en/news/american-academic-freedom-danger-and-its-global-issue>

⁴⁶ See https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/04/19/christophe-jaffrelot-depuis-indira-gandhi-il-n-y-a-jamais-eu-une-telle-personnalisation-du-pouvoir_5452543_3210.html

⁴⁷ See <https://www.unirank.org/>

⁴⁸ See Adu, K. K., & Odame, J. (2023). Academic freedom in Africa: A systematic review of content analysis studies. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 100, Article 102785. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2023.102785>

freedom and identifies five main areas: legal protection, the effects of colonialism, security issues, intellectual freedom, and gender issues. According to the authors, academic freedom in Africa peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, when universities such as Dar es Salaam, Makerere, Ibadan, and Legon played a leading role in debates on colonialism, alternative economic development, and positioning *vis-à-vis* the major Cold War powers. This period gradually gave way to a decline marked by the impoverishment of universities, the rise of authoritarian regimes, and the increased marginalization of researchers in decision-making processes. In many countries, critical academics are monitored, marginalized, or even repressed, as are students. Alain Kassanda's documentary *Coconut Head Generation*⁴⁹, showcases the self-managed film club of students at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. It illustrates and embodies the vitality of “grassroots” academic freedom, driven by the students themselves in a context where the state and university structures struggle to guarantee stable education. This shortcoming is exacerbated by frequent attacks on university autonomy, as evidenced by Ghana’s 2024 law aimed at centralizing control of public universities has sparked strong opposition from faculty members. The authors emphasize that the future of academic freedom in Africa seems uncertain unless academics join forces with civil society in its defense.

These findings are corroborated by recent articles by Wachira Kigotho (2024) and Wagdy Sawahel (2025)⁵⁰ in *University World News*, which describe worrying trends: the rise of authoritarian regimes, knowledge merchandising, the neo liberalization of university management, and the persisting unbalance of academic cooperation with “Global North” institutions. Dependence on international aid and global university rankings contributes for some to a form of “academic colonialism,” resulting in brain drain and the reproduction of knowledge disconnected from local realities. A call was made at the international conference organized by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in 2025, for collective mobilization in favor of academic freedom, considering it an essential pillar of the democratization of knowledge and social transformation in the region. Participants highlighted threats specific to the African context: managerial authoritarianism within universities, increasing bureaucratization, lack of collegiality, and general indifference to the issue in the public sphere. In this fragile landscape, teachers' and researchers' unions appear to be bastions of academic freedom, resisting managerial abuses, budget cuts, and challenges to institutional autonomy. As elsewhere in the world, the relationship between universities and the state is ambivalent: academics claim intellectual independence while remaining structurally dependent on public funding.

In Tunisia, the 2011 revolution and the fall of the Ben Ali regime led to a spectacular jump in the score, followed by relative stability, before a sharp recent decline assigned to the hardening of Kaïs Saïed's regime. A group of academics recently warned of increasing attacks on freedom of research in Tunisia, in the broader context of violations of public rights and freedoms. The group denounced long prison sentences (up to 33 years) handed down to several researchers, such as Franco-Tunisian Hamza Medde, accused of “conspiracy against state security” without

⁴⁹ Kassanda, Alain (dir. and screenwriter). *Coconut Head Generation*. France, Nigeria, 2023, 89 min.

⁵⁰ Kigotho, W. (2024, February 22). *How universities in Africa lost their academic freedom*. University World News. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2024022115014069> ; “Academic freedom: Universities threaten authoritarianism” Wagdy Sawahel. (May 8, 2025), University World News. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20250506225558524>

a fair trial, and Victor Dupont, a French doctoral student conducting sociological research on the 2011 revolution⁵¹, who was arrested by the Tunisian military justice system.

In Turkey, the deterioration of academic freedom has been evident since the establishment of the authoritarian regime of Erdogan and the AKP, further exacerbated by the 2016 coup attempt, and confirmed by an oppressive legal framework. For the past ten years, Turkey has engaged in a systematic and widespread crackdown on the academic world. More than 7,000 higher education staff have been dismissed by emergency decrees, including 3,850 academics from 107 institutions. Fifteen private universities have been closed, affecting nearly 60,000 students. The “Academics for Peace” petition, published between 2016 and 2018, resulted in an unprecedented wave of legal proceedings: more than 1,000 academics were targeted, 822 were criminally prosecuted, 549 were suspended, forced to resign or dismissed, and approximately 190 were convicted of “terrorist propaganda,” with 34 prison sentences, including four without parole. At the end of March 2021, the campaign had recorded a further 533 administrative investigations, 159 legal proceedings, 38 detentions, 30 suspensions, and 38 dismissals. Several academics have been targeted by this crackdown: Esra Mungan, arrested in 2016 for supporting the “Academics for Peace” petition; Zübeyde Füsun Üstel, sentenced to 15 months in prison in 2019; Vedat Demir, arrested in 2016 and released in 2017; and Nuriye Gülmen, dismissed from teaching and imprisoned several times, to the point of going on hunger strike. Beyond individual sanctions, structural measures have accentuated the institutions loss of autonomy: since 2014, administrative authorization has been required for any public intervention by researchers, while the Higher Education Council (YÖK) can dismiss a teacher on mere suspicion of propaganda. This authoritarian dynamic has extended to campuses: in 2021, student protests against the appointment of a rector at Boğaziçi (Bosphorus) University led to 560 arrests and several detentions. Other students, opposed to military operations in Syria, have been sentenced to prison terms. Altogether, these practices reveal a political strategy to discredit the academic world and authoritatively reorganize the production of knowledge⁵².

In Egypt, the 2014 protective constitutional article (Art. 21) and the slight improvement post Hosni Mubarak quickly gave way to a persistent deterioration under Mohamed Morsi and Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi, as documented by local academics⁵³.

Violations of academic freedom in the Israeli Palestinian territories must be analyzed rigorously in their dual, complex pattern. In Israel, violations are documented and made public by NGOs and scholarly associations. Academic freedom has been significantly eroded since the radicalization of Benjamin Netanyahu's regime following the 2022 legislative elections. This trend has become much more patent since October 2023. In the case of Palestinian universities, attacks on academic freedom take the form of major structural obstacles: bans or restrictions on the mobility of teachers, researchers, and students, and persistent censorship of topics related to Israel. The central issue today is no longer the mere functioning of institutions but the very survival of the university community. As for the restrictions imposed by the Palestinian

⁵¹ See https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2025/04/29/en-tunisie-la-remise-en-cause-d-une-recherche-scientifique-libre-est-l-autre-face-des-violations-des-droits-et-libertes-publiques_6601205_3232.html

⁵² *Academic Freedom in Turkey*, Olga Selin Hünler, 2022, University Autonomy Decline

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003306481> ; A report on academic freedom in Turkey: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Opinion/Submissions/Academics/INSAN_H_AKLARI_OKULU3.pdf

⁵³ See <https://afteegypt.org/en/research-en/2023/07/11/34788-afteegypt.html>

authorities and Hamas, the information available remains fragmentary, but it points to extremely severe violations.

According to the V-Dem index, the Israel national democracy score fell from 0.935 in 2022 to 0.850 in 2023, a historic low. Between October and the end of 2023, approximately 130 Arab students and teachers were summoned before disciplinary committees in 33 institutions, often without prior investigation. In October 2023, Education Minister Yoav Kisch demanded “severe measures” against any expression considered to be support for the terrorist group Hamas, recommending students to be expelled within 72 hours. In addition, universities expect the adoption of a law, “McCarthyite” in nature, allowing for the dismissal of staff members accused of “supporting terrorism,” under the threat of funding withdrawal. The Adalah NGO⁵⁴ has documented several cases of suspensions and disciplinary sanctions targeting critical academics on both sides. Among the most emblematic cases is that of Israeli American professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian. She was suspended from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Faculty of Law in March 2024 following an appearance on Israel's Channel 14 News, during which she accused Israel of committing genocide in Gaza, as well as for signing the “*Childhood researchers and students call for immediate ceasefire in Gaza*” petition. She was arrested in April 2024 and detained in conditions considered humiliating. The American Anthropological Association (AAA) sent a letter to the president and rector of the Hebrew University expressing its “deep concern” about these measures. The association also expressed shock that the university's letter to the professor had been made public and circulated on social media, which, in its view, fueled hateful messages and threats of violence against the professor⁵⁵.

This sum of data points to an increasingly repressive climate, specifically targeting critical researchers, regardless of their identity affiliation. Concomitantly, ideological surveillance networks are multiplying, such as the Im Tirtzu organization, which regularly publishes blacklists of Israeli academics considered “anti-Zionist” or “traitors.” One should mention the Alliance for Academic Freedom (AAF)⁵⁶, initiated by The Third Narrative group⁵⁷. It brings together over 120 progressive and liberal academics determined to preserve academic freedom on all subjects related to Israel-Palestine issues. It rejects academic boycotts and blacklists by principle. The association affirms its commitment to empathetic discourse towards both peoples, rigorous analysis, and open intellectual exchange, regardless of the points of view, even those defending positions of academic boycotts⁵⁸. Similarly, statements such as anthropologist Erica Weiss’ “*Speaking Truth to Israel Requires More Than Academic Freedom*”⁵⁹ article underline that defending freedom of expression is not enough when it comes to supporting researchers affected by acts of censorship. The author points out that several academics, such as Ghassan Hage⁶⁰, have been dismissed, suspended, or threatened for their positions in favor of multi-ethnic and multicultural coexistence. The article stresses that the discourse on academic freedom can sometimes be meaningless in Israel if the political biases behind the repression are not factored in.

⁵⁴ See <https://www.adalah.org/en>

⁵⁵ See <https://americananthro.org/advocacy-statements/letter-of-support-for-professor-nadera-shalhoub-kevorkian/>

⁵⁶ See <https://thirdnarrative.org/alliance-for-academic-freedom/>

⁵⁷ See <https://thirdnarrative.org/>

⁵⁸ See <https://www.aaup.org/academe/issues/fall-2024/state-profession-academic-boycotts-reconsidered>

⁵⁹ See <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/palestine-israel-censorship-free-speech/>

⁶⁰ Hage, also an anthropologist, was dismissed from the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Germany on February 9, 2024.

A previous but enlightening report by Bassem Eid, *Academic Freedom at Palestinian Universities* (early 2000s)⁶¹, traces the history of Palestinian universities through three periods: Israeli occupation, Intifada, and the contemporary era. It highlights various human rights violations affecting students and teachers: arrests without charge, violence, expulsions, unfair dismissals of critical professors, but also infiltration of campuses by Palestinian security service agents, particularly in West Bank universities. This issue was further explored and updated in the article *Academic Freedom in Palestinian Universities* and in the book based on this investigation, *Not in Kansas Anymore* (2021), by Cary Nelson. Based on an analysis of journalistic and academic sources, and numerous interviews conducted in the field (2014 to 2016), this work aims to broaden understanding of internal violations within the Palestinian Gaza and West Bank academic spheres, which “*are largely ignored in Western countries*” because they are “*little known*”. The book documents violent attacks on academic freedom “*by the Palestinian Authority as well as armed groups and terrorist organizations, foremost Hamas*”⁶². Nelson presents case studies, including those of two Palestinian teachers who were subjected to pressure and reprisals because of their opinions or work.

In the summer of 2025, the situation reached an extreme and different level in Gaza, as evidenced by the open letter published on July 14, 2025, by the presidents of the enclave's three main universities (Al-Aqsa University, Al-Azhar University-Gaza, and the Islamic University of Gaza) denouncing the systematic destruction of Higher education, described as a “*scholasticide*”. This term, now in use in several international organizations, refers to a deliberate and massive attack on educational infrastructure, including Higher education. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the phenomenon observed in Gaza since 2024 exceeds, in intensity and speed, the destruction of schools in Syria (2011-2020) or Ukraine (since 2022)⁶³. Recent publications, notably those of the British Academy and the Project on Middle East Political Science⁶⁴, confirm this analysis. In this tragic context, international initiatives such as the TESI⁶⁵ platform, launched in 2024 by the An-Najah University in Nablus, in collaboration with the Union of Mediterranean Universities (UNIMED) and the Palestinian Student Scholarship Fund, illustrate a desire for academic resilience by attempting to offer students in Gaza the opportunity to continue their education remotely, in spite of the destruction of their institutions.

University professors and researchers in Gaza, when they have not been killed or injured in the bombings (the exact number remains unknown), are trying to find ways to flee abroad. The Gaza Government Media Office, an organization linked to the Hamas authorities, reported in the summer of 2025 that 193 teachers and researchers had died, but no verifiable data is available. On the other hand, there has been a real and documented increase in the number of applications submitted by these academic refugees to dedicated aid programs, notably the French PAUSE program.

⁶¹ Eid, B. (2000). *Academic freedom at Palestinian universities: a human rights report*. Mediterranean Journal of Human Rights, 4, 207-226.

⁶² Nelson, C. *Not in Kansas Anymore: Academic Freedom in Palestinian Universities*. Washington DC: Academic Engagement Network, January 2021. 184 p.

⁶³ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR), “*UN experts deeply concerned over ‘scholasticide’ in Gaza*”, press release, April 17, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/un-experts-deeply-concerned-over-scholasticide-gaza>

⁶⁴ The British Academy, “*Education under Attack in Conflict Zones*”, The British Academy Journal, vol. 13, no. 1, 2023, <https://journal.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/articles/13/1/a16> as well as “Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS). *The War on Gaza and Middle East Political Science*.” POMEPS Studies, April 2024, no. 51.

⁶⁵ See <https://tesi.najah.edu/en/about/on-tesi/>

Box 4: Academic freedom absent in over half of the globe, an INALCO survey

INALCO in partnership with several scientific interest groups (GIS) and area studies networks launched a survey in 2024. The “Research, training, and expertise in restricted or impeded fields: practices, methods, and new resources” aimed to examine the field practices of researchers facing access restrictions in sensitive geographical or thematic contexts.

Based on responses from more than 400 researchers in the humanities and social sciences in France, this survey focuses on those whose fields of study are in areas subject to political, administrative, security, diplomatic, or ethical constraints that may hinder or even prevent on-site investigations. The survey introduces the concepts of “prevented,” “hindered,” or “constrained” fieldwork, which refer to the various obstacles researchers encounter in their fieldwork. These obstacles range from visa refusals, bans on staying in regions considered sensitive, limited access to sources, bureaucratic norms, to implicit injunctions to self-censorship. The new global context calls for in-depth reflection on the conditions for producing knowledge in the social sciences, as well as on ways to preserve and renew regional expertise in the face of these evolving constraints.

Three major lessons emerge:

First, restrictions on access to the field are widespread, multifaceted, and often cumulative. Second, these obstacles profoundly affect research practices, to the point of compromising the continuity of expertise on certain regions or themes. Finally, urgent institutional support and training needs have emerged, particularly to strengthen remote research methods.

- The cumulative and systemic nature of restrictions: in more than three-quarters of cases, several types of obstacles overlap. Political and administrative limitations and security contexts are the most frequently cited, followed by diplomatic tensions between the researcher's country of residence and the country where they are conducting their research, directly affecting one-third of respondents. These tensions are often combined with local or institutional restrictions, creating a web of constraints that are difficult to circumvent.

A second set of constraints relates to the researcher's home institution: more than 40% of participants mention restrictions imposed by their university or affiliated organization in relation to security, ethical, or administrative standards. Tenured researchers appear to be particularly exposed, which raises questions about the differentiated application of rules according to status. In this context, as we will see below, the appointment of Security and Defense Officials (SDOs), authorized to approve or reject missions abroad, has attracted a great deal of criticism: opaque evaluation criteria, lack of dialogue with laboratories, and evaluators' lack of understanding of the realities on the ground.

Faced with these realities, researchers are deploying various strategies: redefining their objects or fields of study, using new tools and resources to collect and analyze data remotely. These adjustments affect the quality, reliability, and scope of scientific results, and lead to increased workloads and expenses in terms of logistics, coordination, and security. The constraints are not only logistical or administrative; they affect the very substance of the research. In the Sahel, Iran, Russia and Syria, area-based expertise is now under threat. Elsewhere, sensitive topics are becoming difficult to address (China, India). Over half of the researchers report having had to

forego certain data or interviews, a quarter self-censor, and two-thirds have been forced to modify their research questions or topics. This poses a real risk of lasting impoverishment of research in certain areas of the world or on certain topics.

Nearly half of respondents have experienced total inaccessibility to their field, and a third have mentioned supervisors' refusals to allow their students to perform fieldwork due to a lack of sufficient guarantees. Not only is the risk of collective skill loss tangible, but access to first-hand information, essential for understanding the reality on the ground beyond official or propaganda narratives, is also seriously threatened.

Source: Allès Delphine, Perrodin Louise, "*Research, training, and expertise in 'prevented' or 'hindered' fields, Practices, methods, and new resources*" data paper #1, Inalco, December 2024⁶⁶

In the Americas, while the first decade was characterized by high scores across all countries studied, the second period reveals more contrasting dynamics. Brazil recorded a spectacular decline after the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and the arrival in power of Jair Bolsonaro, followed by a relative recovery under Lula's presidency, but has not returned to its initial score. In the United States, erosion began during Donald Trump's first term, as we will develop below. In Argentina, Javier Milei's arrival in power in December 2023 was accompanied by an extremely sharp decline⁶⁷, as evidenced by the large-scale brain drain currently underway⁶⁸. Mexico saw a slight improvement at the start of Claudia Sheinbaum's term, after five years of decline. The situation remains broadly stable in Canada, partly thanks to strong mobilization by academic communities and the adoption in June 2022 of a law guaranteeing academic freedom in Quebec universities. However, this protective framework has not prevented a gradual erosion of the country's position, revealing latent tensions and growing vulnerabilities⁶⁹.

In Europe, unsurprisingly, Russia and Hungary have seen a steady decline in their scores for over 15 years. Italy, Finland, France, and the United Kingdom are now showing signs of deterioration, with the UK experiencing a more pronounced and earlier decline. Jérôme Heurtaux shows that, from 2010-2015 onwards, Poland and Hungary became prime examples of the gradual erosion of academic freedom, in a context marked by the consolidation of national-conservative regimes⁷⁰. These two countries have concentrated a set of emblematic measures of this regression, providing an analytical framework for a broader reflection on the vulnerability of academic institutions in the face of authoritarian political changes. Based on these cases, one can identify a general typology of attacks on academic freedom and draw a distinction between authoritarian threats, sometimes even within universities, and the more insidious dynamics at work in democratic contexts. Authoritarian attacks are driven by ideological and institutional control. They include political or administrative control over

⁶⁶ See <https://www.inalco.fr/actualites/enquete-recherche-formation-et-expertise-sur-des-terrains-empeches-ou-entraves-premiers>

⁶⁷ See <https://nacla.org/destroying-dreams-dismantling-public-university/>

⁶⁸ See <https://www.nytimes.com/1966/08/19/archives/university-teachers-begin-leaving-argentina-some-express-doubts.html>

⁶⁹ See <https://www.lawnow.org/the-state-of-academic-freedom-in-canada/>

⁷⁰ Jérôme Heurtaux, "Academic freedom as a global issue" in *Cultures et Conflits*, 2025, <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-cultures-et-conflits-2025-3-page-95?lang=fr>

universities and research, as in Poland and Hungary since the early 2010s, and forms of religious, ideological, or moral repression in which certain research topics become taboo or prohibited.

Attacks on academic autonomy in democracies often take insidious forms, not through explicit censorship, but through structural changes that permanently compromise independence. Recurring budget cuts, attacks on certain disciplines dismissed as militant or ideological, specifically in campaigns against so-called “wokism”; and growing mistrust of researchers, accused of elitism or bias, which undermines their role in public debates and weakens their social legitimacy. This paints a complex picture of threats to academic freedom, which are both diverse in form and different depending on political regimes. As we pointed out in the introduction, constitutional democracy itself no longer serves as a sufficient bulwark against the degradation of critical and scientific space.

The gravity of the situation in the United States and the growing role played by the People's Republic of China should be of particular concern. China ranks as the world's second largest scientific power in many fields, and leader in key sectors such as artificial intelligence, physics, and quantum technologies. Added to the US degradation, it appears that a significant, if not the main portion of the world's so-called “excellent” scientific output is now evolving in environments where the autonomy of knowledge is subject to systemic and existential constraints. The situation is complicated by the fact that China, while deliberately ignoring the principle of academic freedom, remains relatively untouched by the phenomenon of “post-truth” that now saturates Western public spaces. Whereas the United States is confronted with an ideological climate combining religious messianism, selective techno-enthusiasm, and mistrust of scientific institutions of excellence and internationalization, China presents the face of an atheist, scientific, and techno-solutionist state, favorable to happy scientific globalization (the famous “win-win” slogan). The implementation, as of October 1, 2025 (National Day), of the new K visa⁷¹ is a good illustration. This visa is intended to attract young foreign talent in the fields of science and technology by offering them greater mobility. It allows researchers and entrepreneurs to stay, study, and collaborate in China without requiring sponsorship from an employer or local sponsor, and is also a response to Trump's protectionism in this area.

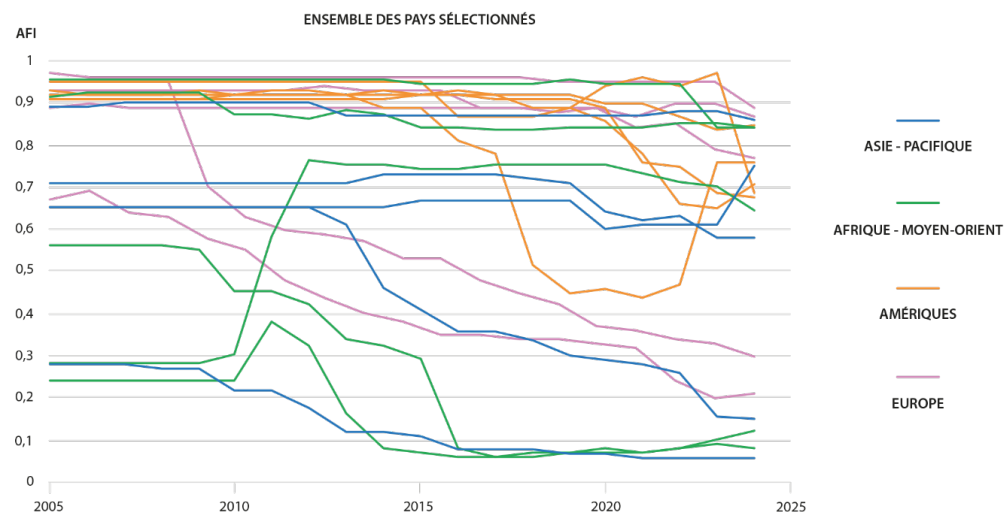
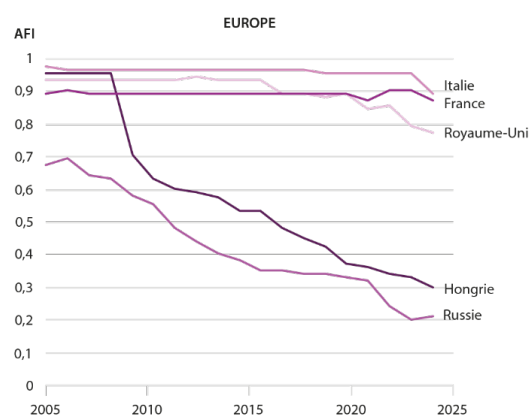
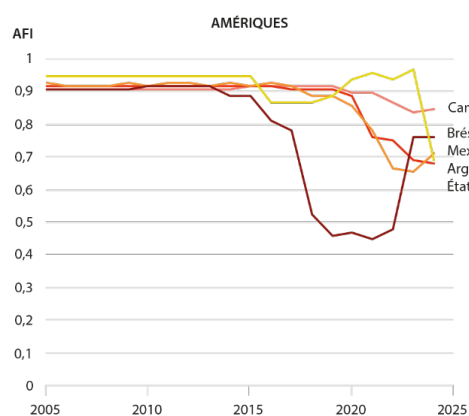
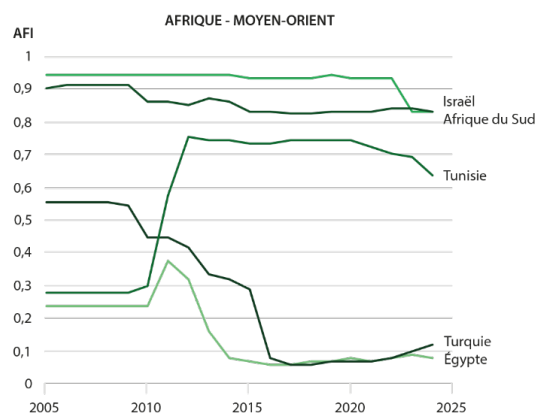
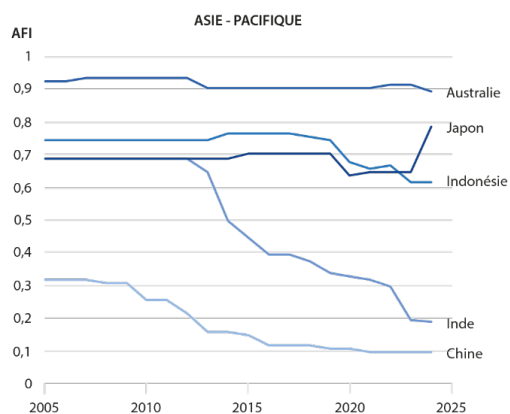
This paradoxical tension challenges a long-held belief in the history of contemporary scientific thought: namely, that only democratic societies, based on intellectual freedom and critical plurality, can produce lasting scientific power. This idea, championed by figures such as Albert Einstein and Fang Lizhi, is now being challenged by China's scientific achievements, just as it was in its day by the excellence achieved in certain Soviet programs. In other words, scientific creativity can coexist with authoritarian political regimes, if they invest strategically in research and know how to reap techno-nationalist benefits from it. This new global situation is redrawing the lines of force at play in the international academic landscape. While the United States is gradually closing its doors to international students and researchers in the name of a reaffirmed scientific nationalism, China, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, is wide opening its laboratories to talent from both the global South and the academic North, seeking to attract young doctoral students, established researchers, and potential international award winners. Many of them are placing their hopes in the emergence of a third way, embodied by the Choose Europe initiative⁷² led by European institutions under the impetus of Ursula von der Leyen.

⁷¹ AEF wire agency, August 20, 2025, “China creates new visa to attract young talent in science and technology.”

⁷² See <https://www.chooseeurope.eu/update/?id=choose-europe-for-science>

Europe, as the world's third largest scientific power, still stands out for its largely preserved respect for academic freedom. To date, it remains the only regional area where this founding principle of intellectual life continues to be, overall, institutionally guaranteed. With its diverse scientific heritage, intellectual tradition based on critical humanism, and democratic norms enshrined in its founding treaties, the European Union has the political, symbolic, and institutional resources to initiate a large-scale countermovement, both within the Union and beyond, in response to the abuses observed elsewhere. However, this relative exceptionalism should not obscure the weak, and in some cases already alarming, signals coming from several Member States. Recent events, political pressure, attempts at ideological conformity, or authoritarian restructuring of certain universities, call for the utmost vigilance, if not legitimate concern. We report on this in more detail below.

Graph 1: Measured indicators of changes in academic freedom in selected countries between 2005 and 2024 (data from 2024).



Source : Academic Freedom Index, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität et V-Dem Institute, décembre 2024. <https://academic-freedom-index.net/>

Dorian RYSER, CERI, Sciences Po/CNRS, juin 2025

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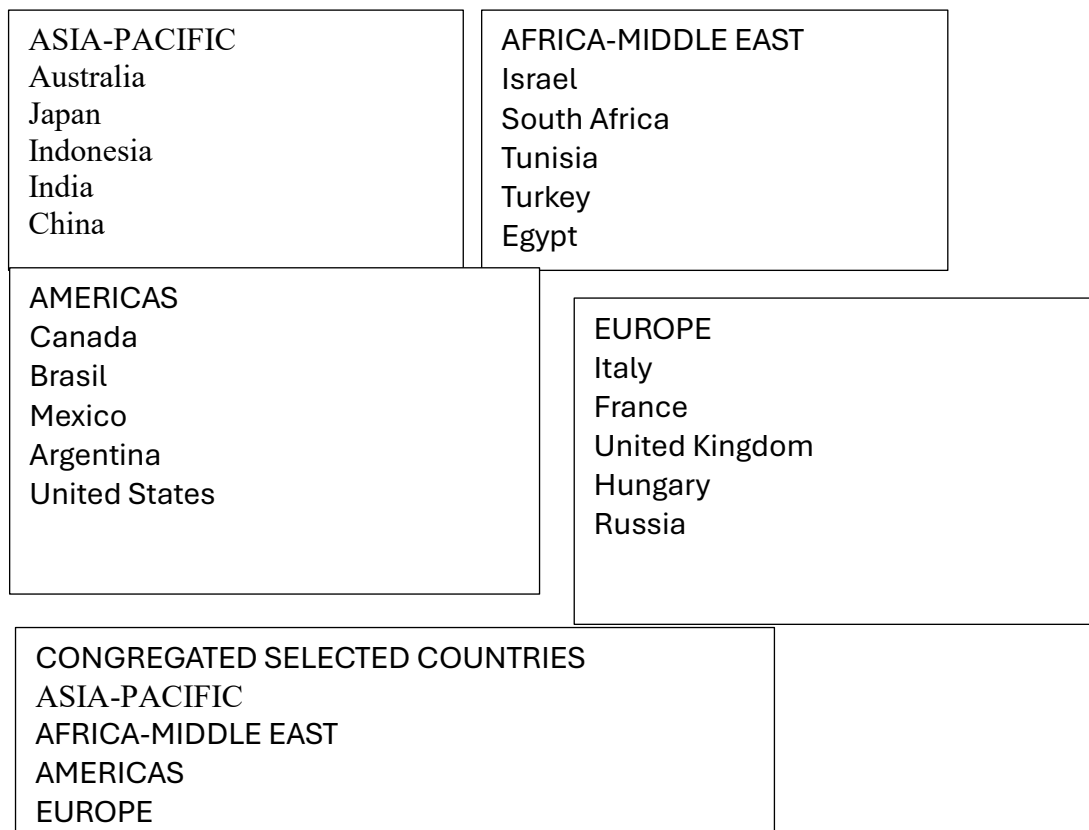
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Dorian RYSER, CERI, Science Po/CNRS, June 2025

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Source: Academic Freedom Index, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität and V-Dem Institute, December 2024. <https://academic-freedom-index.net/>



6. The seriousness of the US case

The burning issue of academic freedom has been particularly acute in the United States since Trump's second term in office. In truth, the situation had been deteriorating objectively for years. The difference lies today in the scale, violence, and consistency of the methods used to wage war on universities and academics. The world's leading scientific power, the oldest constitutional democracy of the modern era, is set to destroy its scientific heritage before the very eyes of the world. The disruptive element here is that the United States produces most Nobel Prize winners and occupies a unique position in international research excellence networks. Except for the courts' resistance, civil society is either supportive or mesmerized. Yet, the ongoing attacks are being meticulously documented. All universities, prestigious or modest, private or public, across all disciplines, from social sciences to climate science, biology and medicine, are affected, in a context where political hostility towards expert knowledge is blatantly uninhibited and violent.

This brief description of the situation in the United States is based on data published in 2025, following Donald Trump's second election, and complements the results of the indicators cited above for previous periods. Katrin Kinzelbach, co-editor of the annual report on academic freedom, sums up in an interview with *Le Monde* that “the speed and number of attacks on

American universities are breathtaking”⁷³ The situation is receiving global media coverage, including in countries impervious to academic freedom. This clouds the perception of many commentators, easily manipulated into thinking that the situation is serious only in the United States. In the United States, A key source of information on this subject is the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), which, in country and under the leadership of its president Randi Weingarten, offers a highly accurate analysis of the state of higher education and research in the United States⁷⁴.

According to the AAUP's 2023 report, the United States are facing an “ideological attack on public higher education, unprecedented in its history” from some of the most powerful political actors and private interests in the country. The MAGA program, along with the Project 2025 plan promoted by Donald Trump and his followers, constitute a deliberately planned ideological war. The 2024 national survey of 9,000 teachers conducted by the AAUP and the National Study of Faculty Attitudes Toward Academic Freedom⁷⁵ shows a perceived sharp decline in academic freedom on campuses, a sharp increase in “unconcealed” self-censorship, and growing, pressure from donors, legislators, and boards of trustees to exclude certain topics deemed controversial.

Since January 2025, the deconstruction of the American ecosystem underway since January, is evidenced by the dismissal of 1,200 employees from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and a 10% reduction in staff at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which plays a central role in meteorology, climatology, ocean monitoring, and climate change. Over \$6 billion in school grants have been frozen, and scientific agencies such as the National Science Foundation (NSF) have suffered massive cuts. Up to 56% of the NSF budget, a 73% reduction in staff, a cap on indirect costs at 1%, and the termination of 1,600 to 2,500 research grants representing approximately \$2 to \$2.5 billion. The 15% cap put on indirect costs has led to the abandonment or interruption of thousands of clinical and biomedical projects. The decision to withdraw approximately \$200 million from Johns Hopkins University and \$400 million from Columbia University was motivated, also, by pro-Palestinian protests. Harvard, for its part, saw an additional \$450 million canceled, bringing the total amount of funding cut from Ivy League universities to approximately \$2.2 billion. University presidents were also the focus of intense pressure. At the University of Virginia (UVA), for instance, Donald Trump threatened to cut funding, visas, and aid if the institution's president did not resign. James E. Ryan ultimately chose to step down to protect his university. Legal proceedings to challenge these measures will very likely be lengthy and complex. And however powerful and wealthy they may be, Ivy League universities (Columbia, Harvard, Brown, Princeton, and Yale) ended up compromising with the Trump administration in the summer of 2025, revealing the paradox of institutions with billions of dollars in endowments but whose independence remains fragile in the face of federal funding leverage⁷⁶.

⁷³ See https://www.lemonde.fr/sciences/article/2025/03/13/katrin-kinzelbach-chercheuse-la-vitesse-et-le-nombre-d-attaques-contre-les-universites-americaines-sont-a-couper-le-souffle_6579948_1650684.html

⁷⁴ Randi Weingarten, *Academic Freedom, Democracy, and the Role of Faculty Unions*; and also Petra Molnar (York University) *The Conversation: The Trump administration's move to ban international students at Harvard escalates attacks on universities*

⁷⁵ NORC at the University of Chicago. 2024. *National Study of Faculty Attitudes Toward Academic Freedom*. <https://www.norc.org/research/projects/national-study-faculty-attitudes-toward-academic-freedom.html>

⁷⁶ Nicolas Chapuis, “Les universités américaines transigent avec l’administration Trump” (American universities compromise with the Trump administration), *Le Monde*, August 16,

Simultaneously, three NASA departments were closed. We should recall that the agency also plays a central role in fundamental research, advanced engineering, and Earth observation, particularly climate observation, thanks to its satellites. These departments shutdowns reflect a worrying strategic decline in long-term scientific investment. Other research projects have been frozen, canceled, or postponed, particularly in the agricultural sector (UC Davis had received \$441 million in federal funding in 2024) and in the field of climate science, one of the main targets of the MAGA “anti-climate” movement⁷⁷.

The state of Florida is considered a laboratory for MAGA-driven education policies, an ideal-typical model of ideological repression applied to higher education. This includes but is not limited to: the removal of statutory guarantees associated with tenure, the political takeover of New College of Florida, and the elimination of its diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, the removal of sociology from the core curriculum, and the banning of the Advanced Placement program in African American studies. In addition, the adoption of the Stop Woke Act bans the teaching of certain subjects deemed “divisive,” such as critical race theory, sexual orientation, and gender. The Stop Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees Act, nicknamed the *Stop Woke Act*, is a Florida state law approved by Governor Ron DeSantis that came into effect on July 1, 2022. Since then, over thirty US states, including Ohio and Texas, have passed similar legislation restricting educational content. The law has been widely criticized and challenged in court: in August 2022, a federal judge issued a preliminary injunction, ruling that the Stop Woke Act violated the First Amendment by restricting freedom of expression. In March 2024, an appeals court upheld this decision, ruling that the law was too vague and penalized a wide range of opinions. In July 2024, a permanent injunction was granted against the provisions relating to workplace training⁷⁸.

In the face of these offensives, spearheaded by the MAGA political agenda and directly targeting universities, courts often remain the main safeguard against arbitrariness. In a complaint brought forward by thirteen universities, for instance, a federal judge blocked a 15% cap on indirect costs for the National Science Foundation May 2025, describing it as an “arbitrary and capricious” measure. A similar cap proposal was also suspended by court order in the Association of American Universities v. Department of Defense lawsuit. A proposal for massive cuts in the National Institutes of Health (NIH), 40% of the budget (\$18 billion), with a 5,000 people layoff and a suspension of funding, is also the subject of legal challenge. Finally, 8,000 pages of public websites have been deleted, revealing a strategy of withdrawing or censoring public information⁷⁹. The MIT Technology Review, for its part, has meticulously documented the cancellation of hundreds of scientific projects held opposing to the White House's ideological positions, particularly on climate, clean energy, and health, which have had their funding cut by the NSF. This research is crucial to reducing emissions, helping marginalized communities adapt to climate change, and developing clean fuels.

Since January 2025, attacks on internationalized higher education have been part of a systematic and consistent strategy, against a backdrop of increased ideological, security, and geopolitical tensions. In the name of “national security” Donald Trump signed in June an executive order

2025. https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2025/08/16/les-universites-americaines-transigent-avec-l-administration-trump_6630552_3210.html

⁷⁷ See American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), Alessandra Zimmermann, Report FY 2026 R&D Appropriations, Federal R&D estimates, July 15, 2025: https://www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/R%26D%20Estimates%20Report%202026_1.pdf

⁷⁸ See <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/7>

⁷⁹ See <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/item/29460:academic-freedom-at-risk-the-view-from-north-america>

temporarily banning international students from attending Harvard, where they represent nearly 30% of the student body. A federal judge immediately suspended the measure before even examination of the merits of the case, ruling that the university would suffer irreparable harm. This political and judicial resistance comes at a cost. How long can it last? Simultaneously, the Trump administration has initiated proceedings to revoke Columbia's accreditation, following accusations of anti-Semitism linked to student protests after the terrorist attacks of October 7, 2023. In June 2025, a special Harvard Educational Review issue, “*Education and Palestine*”, was due to appear but was censored by the university's legal affairs department: it included an article on scholasticide in Gaza, as reported by *The Times of Israel*⁸⁰.

These measures reflect no less than an ideological state reset, in which the administration seeks to weaken or even destroy certain academic institutions perceived as overly powerful counterweights to the executive branch's agenda, reduce federal scientific expertise, and ideologically control higher education. We are witnessing a challenge to the foundations of university democratization: academic freedom, independence of research, and access to research data by civil society, concludes John Rosenberg in *Harvard Magazine*⁸¹.

Donald Trump and the MAGA movement have, since 2024, intensified their political and ideological offensive against American universities deemed too “woke” or elitist, accused of promoting a “radical left-wing” agenda at the expense of “true American values”. Their narratives describe universities as elitist bastions hostile to patriotism, conservative freedom of expression, and ideological neutrality.

Political and legal reactions have been quick. Sixteen US states (including New York, California, and Illinois) have filed a class action lawsuit against budget cuts targeting the National Science Foundation and the elimination of “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI) programs. Academic mobilization is also gradually taking shape: over 1,900 members of the National Academies have signed an open letter warning of the “destruction of the country's scientific achievement” and calling for the protection of basic research. Researchers are considering emigration: according to the journal *Nature*, 75% of the most internationally mobile are intending to leave. For AAUP however, the erosion of academic freedom is part of a long-term trend and is the result of fifty years of public disengagement. It is now “merely” exacerbated by the frontal attack launched by a president who views the university as a ‘woke’ stronghold and “a Marxist enemy”. This prolonged divestment has resulted in a steady rise in tuition fees, a dramatic increase in student debt, structural instability in the governance of institutions, and a massive reduction in permanent positions. Two-thirds of American academic staff now work in precarious conditions, and only 25% of faculty members are tenured or on track to become tenured. The result is a systematic reliance on a precarious “uberized” academic workforce that weakens intellectual autonomy, encourages self-censorship, and discourages risk-taking in both research and teaching. Professional precariousness also leads to a growing avoidance of topics considered socially sensitive or politically controversial.

⁸⁰ See AFP, “*Trump faces academia: fears for Middle East research*” July 31, 2025. <https://fr.timesofisrael.com/trump-face-au-monde-universitaire-craintes-pour-la-recherche-sur-le-moyen-orient/>

⁸¹ See articles by John S. Rosenberg in *Harvard Magazine* [In the Crosshairs](#), [The Trump administration vs. higher education](#) ; [Harvard Resists Government Demands](#) ; [The Government Details Its Demands](#) ; [The Faculty's Fears](#) ; [Trump Administration Aims at Harvard Funding](#) and this contribution by Alan Lightman, professor at MIT, in *The Atlantic* [The Dark Ages are back](#)

Growing public mistrust of higher education only worsens the situation described above. A 2023 Pew Research Center survey indicates that 45% of Americans believe that universities have a “negative impact on the country.” A 2024 Gallup poll confirms this trend: trust in universities is sharply declining. Among those expressing mistrust, 41% denounce “leftist indoctrination” or a lack of intellectual pluralism. Finally, there is a growing perception that tenure for teachers is a form of intellectual elitism considered “illegitimate”.

Box 5: Why do academic upheavals in the US have such a global impact?

The data collected by the AEF provides a particularly rich corpus that clearly demonstrates, based on accurate data⁸², that the US is one of most strongly connected country to the rest of the world in scientific terms. This connectivity shows in their intense international collaborations and in their disciplinary and geographical diversity. Finally, the United States is a hub of production, and a vector of dissemination and interconnection, particularly in experimental disciplines.

The United States occupies a central position in global scientific co-publication networks. It is also the main international partner for China and the European Union. In 2022, it co-authored 56,970 articles with Chinese researchers, about twice as many as with its two other main partners, Canada (29,255 co-publications) and Germany (27,767). France ranks seventh with 17,114 co-publications, behind Australia and ahead of India. The figures also highlight the decisive role of the United States in the scientific output of many countries.

For instance, 16.8% of Chinese publications are co-authored with American researchers, a figure identical to that observed for Canada. Japan reaches a rate of 11.6%, Germany 11.2%, and Brazil 10.7%. Co-publications with France account for only 3.1% of American scientific output.

To further refine the influence on national size alone, the scientific affinity index measures the relative intensity of collaborations. This index highlights a particularly strong affinity between the United States, China, and Canada, each reaching a value of 1.06. The scores are significantly lower for France and Italy (0.53), as well as for Germany (0.62) and the United Kingdom (0.64), despite their shared idiom.

In terms of disciplines, data from the Leiden ranking 2019 - 2022 indicate varying degrees of internationalization across different fields. Physical and engineering sciences have the highest rate, with 59% of international co-publications. This rate remains high in Life and Earth sciences (51.9%), drops to 39.7% in biomedical and health sciences, and reaches only 29.3% in Humanities and Social sciences. Mathematics and computer science fall somewhere in between.

At the institutional level, leading American universities stand out for their high degree of scientific openness. MIT, for example, has a rate of 59% international co-publications, followed by Harvard (55.4%), Columbia (50.3%), and finally Yale and Stanford, both around 48%. These

⁸² Marie Simon, June 6, 2025, specifies: "*The bibliometric indicators on international collaborations presented in the [OECD data explorer](#) are based on Scopus, the database of the publisher Elsevier. The [Leiden Ranking 2024](#) is fed by Web of Science data for the years 2019 to 2022*". See <https://www.aefinfo.fr/depeche/732083-avec-quels-pays-et-dans-quels-domaines-scientifiques-les-chercheurs-etats-uniens-copublient-ils-le-plus>

rates vary greatly depending on the discipline: 73.4% of publications in physics and engineering in Harvard are co-authored with foreign researchers. In the Humanities and Social sciences, the proportion is a modest, but still significant 41.1%.

7. Vigilance required in the European Union

Absolute vigilance is required at the European level regarding academic freedom, as evidenced by the increasing number of statements and measures taken by European institutions since 2022⁸³. The Parliament has launched an annual publication entitled *European Parliament Academic Freedom Monitor* (AFM). In its February 2024 edition, the AFM presented two studies, “Systematizing measures of academic freedom in European Union member states” and “Academic freedom across the EU: analysis of recent trends.” Both were produced with contributions from partner organizations and experts⁸⁴. The authors noted that contrary to the prevailing discourse, particularly in the media, European universities distinguish themselves from the ultra-polarization observed on American campuses. They also oppose a resistance to the hysteria of academic life weakened by conspiracy theories and post-truths, which were elevated to the rank of political mandate under Donald Trump’s presidency. The SCRIPTS (*Science Friction: Patterns, Causes and Effects of Academic Freedom Contestations*) research program, which ran from 2021 to 2025, produced a very insightful comparative analysis of European protection models and realities on the subject of academic freedom⁸⁵.

Respect for academic freedom within the European Union is generally relatively high on average compared to other regions, and stable over time. Yet, nine EU member states have a below-average level of academic freedom: Austria, Malta, Romania, Croatia, Bulgaria, the Netherlands, Greece, Poland, and Hungary. Over the past ten years, eight of these countries have experienced a statistically significant decline in academic freedom or certain of its aspects. The situation in Hungary requires increased vigilance, as the level of academic freedom there has declined further in recent years. It remains low not only in comparison with all other EU member states, but also on a global scale.

Europe is not immune to the rise of populism⁸⁶, as seen across the European research landscape. This is evidenced, for instance, by Article 31 of Decree-Law No. 1660-A/2024 (the “security decree” which became law in 2025) in Italy. It has caused great concern within the local academic community by seeking to impose mandatory cooperation between universities, research institutions and intelligence services, which now includes the disclosure of information whereas confidentially rules were previously optional. This measure is perceived as a serious attack on academic autonomy. Autonomy is a constitutional principle in Italy, protected by Articles 9 and 33 of the Constitution, and reinforced by university reforms, notably the 1999 autonomy statute (Law 168/1989) and the 2010 Gelmini reform (Law 240/2010)⁸⁷.

⁸³ See https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/281295/04.1.a.%20EPRS_STOA_STUD_757804_HE-AcademicFreedom_DraftPanel.pdf

⁸⁴ See [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_STU\(2024\)757798](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_STU(2024)757798) and <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/stoa/en/ep-academic-freedom>

⁸⁵ See https://www.scripts-berlin.eu/research/research-projects/General-Research-Projects/Science-Friction_-_Patterns_-_Causes-and-Effects-of-Academic-Freedom-Contestations/index.html

⁸⁶ See [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/fr/document/EPRS_STU\(2024\)757798](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/fr/document/EPRS_STU(2024)757798)

⁸⁷ See [Sevgi Doğan](#), *La libertà accademica nell’era dei mostri. Rischi e sfide*, Meltemi, 2025.

Viktor Orbán frontal attacks against the Central European University (CEU) since 2017, Erdogan's constant hostility towards the Bosphorus University in Turkey, and the Swedish government's attempts to limit or even ban the mandates of international members of university boards of directors, to be able to directly appoint security experts with the aim of combating foreign interference. Political scientist Jérôme Heurtaux documents the multiple forms these attacks have taken in Hungary and Poland. Ideological repression has primarily targeted gender studies, reduced to a fictional "ideology," and critical history, accused of undermining the national narrative. Several Polish researchers studying the Holocaust have been prosecuted for highlighting the complicity of certain segments of the population in the persecution of Polish Jews. In Budapest, the Central European University (CEU), founded by George Soros, was forced to leave the country after prolonged regulatory harassment. The historical narrative has been nationalized through institutions such as the Institute of National Remembrance, whose resources have been significantly increased to promote a heroic and anti-communist reading of national history. In Hungary, public universities have been placed under the supervision of private foundations run by associates of the Prime Minister, confirming a form of partisan capture of higher education.

The institutional autonomy of higher education systems in EU member states is stable, although threatened. According to the European University Association's University Autonomy Scoreboard, legislative changes have however recently led to declines in financial autonomy (e.g., in Austria, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Slovakia), organizational autonomy (e.g., in Slovenia, Estonia, and Denmark), staff autonomy (in Croatia and Slovakia), and academic autonomy (e.g., in Denmark and Estonia)⁸⁸. Scandinavia is becoming a major cause for concern, as indicated in the *Akademisk frihet så i Norden*⁸⁹ report commissioned by the Swedish Association of Higher Education Institutions (SUHF)⁹⁰. The title in Swedish holds a double meaning: it suggests academic freedom is firmly rooted in Scandinavian countries, but also takes on an ironic, even worrying tone at a time when this freedom, long considered unshakeable, is being undermined by growing economic and ideological pressures. What appeared to be an exemplary stronghold is becoming a testing ground for the speed with which even the most robust systems can falter. Written by Tim Ekberg, the report offers a comparative analysis of the legal framework and actual practices relating to academic freedom in the Nordic countries. The author identifies five major threats: increased political governance of universities, growing bureaucratization, increased dependence on external funding, precariousness of university employments through contractualization, and the deterioration of traditional collegial structures. Seven key recommendations to the Swedish Parliament and government are proposed: explicitly enshrining academic freedom in the Constitution and in higher education legislation, guaranteeing real legal autonomy for universities, reforming the appointment procedures for boards of directors and rectors to strengthen internal governance, simplify the distribution of public funding and reduce the institutional separation between teaching and research, reduce the bureaucratic burden on institutions and restore a relationship of trust, and finally, preserve and enhance traditional collegial structures.

The European Parliament's 2024 report has updated, elaborated, and systematized the main recent trends in academic freedom in ten EU Member States⁹¹. In exploring the different threat dimensions, a rather varied picture emerges among the selected countries. Systemic and

⁸⁸ *Opus. cit.*, p. 14 *et seq.*

⁸⁹ See <https://www.uu.se/en/staff/news/2025/2025-05-22-suhf-report-on-academic-freedom-in-the-nordic-countries> and <https://suhf.se/publikationer/rapporter/>

⁹⁰ *Sveriges universitets-och högskoleförbund.*

⁹¹ See [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/fr/document/EPRS_STU\(2024\)757798](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/fr/document/EPRS_STU(2024)757798)

structural infringements on academic freedom were identified in Hungary only. But concerns are growing about a *de facto* deterioration of academic freedom in most of the other EU Member States covered by the study. In most EU Member States, there is anxiety over undue political interference, particularly from incumbent governments. In some cases, these are direct attacks on the academic community through political arguments disputing the scientific character of certain academic disciplines and calling for public funding for teaching and research programs withdrawal. Determining public budgets for higher education and research indeed falls under a political responsibility. But using political arguments to interfere with the academic responsibility of ensuring the quality of academic activities and determining what is scientific and what is not is an attack on academic freedom.

Studies conducted for the European Parliament identify six main categories of threats to academic freedom in EU countries⁹²:

a/ Political actors intervene, directly or indirectly, in academic freedom on ideological grounds. Examples cited range from the ban on gender studies in Hungary to proposals by politicians (Romania and Denmark) to transfer control of academic freedom outside the university environment. Institutional autonomy is also threatened by laws allowing political control of university governance in several countries.

b/ Attempts are being made to reduce internal autonomy, while the professional instability of critical academics and the growing influence of external political and economic interests are spreading. This phenomenon is significant in Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, and France.

c/ Internal conflicts within the academic community can sometimes restrict academic freedom when certain research or opinions are deemed “unacceptable” by colleagues or, more rarely, by students. This is a complex issue that varies from country to country, with ongoing debates in Austria and France.

d/ Attacks on academics via social media and in the public sphere, particularly on politically sensitive topics such as climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic, are now a common phenomenon across Europe.

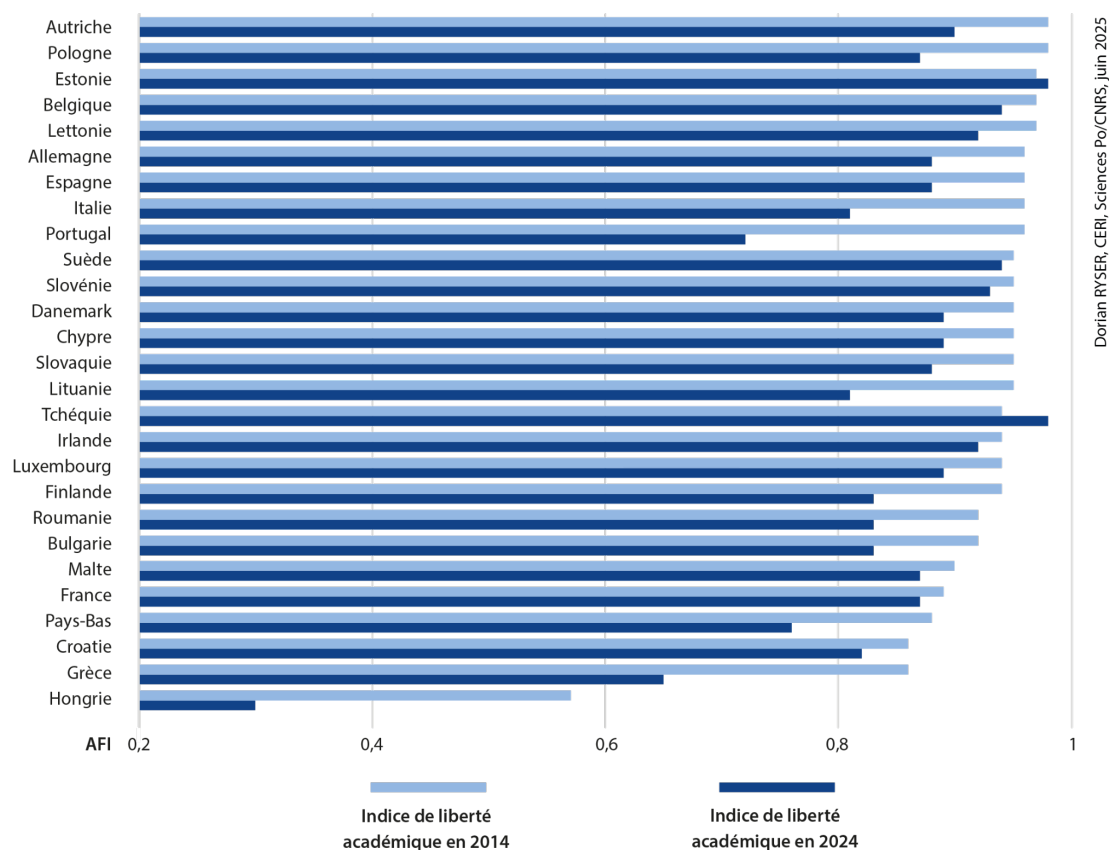
e/ Growing dependence on private funding can lead to undesirable influences on research topics, results, and publications. Legal pressures, such as SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation), have been reported in France, Denmark, and elsewhere, raising concerns about the impact of private interests on academic independence.

f/ New European and national security policies, driven by geopolitical tensions, are increasingly affecting academic freedom by imposing restrictions related to foreign interference, espionage, and national security, which impacts research, training, and the principle of scientific promotion.

Graph 2: Academic Freedom Evolution indicators (Academic Freedom Index, AFI) in European Union countries (2014–2024)

1

⁹²See [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2025/765775/EPRS_STU\(2025\)765775_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2025/765775/EPRS_STU(2025)765775_EN.pdf)



- 1
- Austria
 - Poland
 - Estonia
 - Belgium
 - Letonia
 - Germany
 - Spain
 - Italy
 - Portugal
 - Sweden
 - Slovenia
 - Denmark
 - Cyprus
 - Slovakia
 - Lithuania
 - Czech Republic
 - Ireland
 - Luxembourg
 - Finland
 - Romania
 - Bulgaria
 - Malta
 - France
 - The Netherlands

Croatia
Greece
Hungary

² Academic Freedom Indicator 2014

³ Academic Freedom Indicator 2024

⁴ Dorian RYSER, CERI, Science Po/CNRS, June 2025

⁵ Source: Academic Freedom Index, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität and V-Dem Institute, December 2024. <https://academic-freedom-index.net/>

5.1 The case of Germany

We want to pay particular attention to the situation in Germany regarding the Israeli Palestinian question since 2023. Numerous texts and analyses have been published on the subject (see annexed bibliography). We have narrowed down this summation by relying mainly on a Mathias Delori article published in the spring of 2025 in the journal *Cultures & Conflits*⁹³, while he was a researcher in residence at the Marc Bloch Center in Berlin. This article is an important, rigorously empirical and critical contribution to the understanding of a situation still largely unknown outside Germany. Marked by historical specificities unique to this country, the situation in Germany is indicative of wider shared tensions.

Mathias Delori recounts how he, with historian Sonia Combe and sociologist Alexandra Oeser, organized a conference on German support for Israel after October 7, 2023. The conference brought together historians, philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, and anthropologists specializing in the special relationship between Germany and Israel and its justification in terms of “historical responsibility” and “reason of state” (*Staatsräson*). Under a repressive climate surrounding the organization of events critical of Israel in Germany, the organizers were forced to implement exceptional confidentiality measures, by limiting publicity and access to certain scientific events. One of the most spectacular cancellations concerned the Palestine Congress. This event, with activists and academics, was due to be held in April 2024 and was interrupted by the police due to the participation via videoconference of several speakers considered too critical of Israel in Germany. These included Ghassan Abu Sitta, rector of the University of Glasgow, and Yanis Varoufakis, a left-wing economics professor and former Greek finance minister. Some of the figures invited to the Marc Bloch Center conference had also been the target of similar accusations. This was the case for Moshe Zuckermann: professor at Tel Aviv University and author of a reference work that the federal commissioner for combating anti-Semitism labeled as anti-Semitic for claiming that Israel practiced “apartheid against non-Jews” in addition to Zuckermann’s participation in an event supporting the “Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions” (BDS) movement.

Mathias Delori also revisits the case of Ghassan Hage and the Max Planck Gesellschaft (MPG). In February 2024, the MPG ended its collaboration with the Australian anthropologist following an accusation of “hatred of Israel” published in *Welt am Sonntag*. Ghassan Hage had denounced the situation in Gaza in terms that MPG President Patrick Cramer described as incompatible with the institution’s “fundamental values”. This decision sparked a wave of international

⁹³ Delori, M. [Will German academia surrender without condition?](#) *Political Anthropological Research on International Social sciences (PARISS)*, 2024, 5 (2), pp. 119–165.

outrage. Thousands of academics, including around fifty Israelis, expressed their support for Hage, along with several leading scientific associations, such as the German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology, the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, the European Association of Social Anthropologists, the American Anthropological Association, the Council for Humanities, Arts and Sciences and the Australian Anthropological Society. Hage challenged this decision in court, claiming that his comments had been misinterpreted and that he was not anti-Semitic. On December 10, 2024, the Halle Labor Court rejected his appeal against his dismissal, thereby confirming the position of the Max Planck Society. The academic has since lodged an appeal⁹⁴

The author also highlights in his article the active role of the *Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit*⁹⁵, a collective created in 2021 and now composed of several hundred conservative or even far-right academics violently critical of postcolonial approaches and other critical currents deemed “unscientific”. This network has intensified its attacks since October 7, accusing certain researchers of supporting terrorism. It so happens that this offensive often targets Jewish intellectuals who are critical of Israel. Among the series of emblematic attacks is the targeting of The School for Unlearning Zionism, a program launched in 2020 by Israeli Jewish artists and academics at the *Weissensee Kunsthochschule* in Berlin. As Mathias Delori points out, this logic leads to labeling any Jewish person critical of Zionism as an anti-Semite, be it Moshe Zuckermann or the academics involved in the *Weissensee* program.

This highly polarized context has also fostered the emergence of an academic resistance movement. It had already partially formed in response to the smear campaigns against Achille Mbembe, the accusations of anti-Semitism levelled against the Documenta exhibition (2022), and the repression of student protests in 2023 and 2024. According to the author, this movement started to pool defenses against individual and targeted accusations and to produce a critical counter-hegemonic narrative. These dynamics drew support from several decisions of the International Court of Justice (ICJ): the order of January 26, 2024, on the prevention of genocide, as well as the opinion of July 19, 2024, on the illegality of the Israeli occupation and the violation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, in particular Article 3 relating to apartheid⁹⁶. Numerous voices from the academic, artistic, and associative worlds have begun to denounce the irrationality and gravity of accusing the ICJ of anti-Semitism solely on the grounds that it criticizes the Benjamin Netanyahu government's policy.

Following these decisions, a few German universities adopted more specific positions. One year to the day after the Hamas terrorist attack, the Humboldt University in Berlin published a statement calling for lasting peace while acknowledging the suffering endured by both communities. Numerous academics, in addition to an open letter signed by 150 Jewish intellectuals, criticized the “Never again, is now” resolution adopted on November 8, 2024, by several German parties (SPD, Greens, FDP, CDU/CSU). Initially conceived as a message of solidarity with German Jews, the text quickly sparked fierce disagreement over the definition

⁹⁴ See <https://hageba2a.blogspot.com/2024/02/statement-regarding-my-sacking-from-max.html>; <https://www.mpg.de/23849527/labour-court-halle-rejects-dismissal-claim-of-ghassan-hage>

⁹⁵ Network for Academic Freedom, see <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/netzwerk-wissenschaftsfreiheit-austeilen-und-einstecken-1.5197774>

⁹⁶ International Court of Justice, Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (*South Africa v. Israel*), Order of January 26, 2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/192/orders> International Court of Justice, Legal Consequences of Israel's Policies and Practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, Advisory Opinion of July 19, 2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/186/advisory-opinions>

of anti-Semitism. At the heart of the controversy was not so much the adoption of the definition of antisemitism promoted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), according to which "*antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews that can manifest itself in hatred toward them. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism can target Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, community institutions, and places of worship*". The extension of this definition to criticism directed at the State of Israel is in fact sparking the debate. The wording, considered ambiguous by some, raises fears about potential restrictions on freedom of expression, and specifically academic freedom, in the context of criticism of Israeli government policy. Initially scheduled for the summer, delayed for the first commemoration of October 7, the vote finally took place on the eve of November 9, a highly symbolic date marking *Kristallnacht* in 1938. Academics warn of the danger of collectively blaming the Israeli population for the actions of the State of Israel, as well as the threats posed by making public funding conditional on adherence to the IHRA definition.

Considering a completely different aspect of the recent reality of German universities, the author finally points out that higher education suffers from an even greater precariousness among university staff than in the United States and France. Approximately 90% of courses are taught by non-tenured lecturers (*Dozenten*), whose contracts are generally renewable. This structural precariousness weakens the capacity for critical, even constructive, opposition within the academic field and contributes to the overwhelming silence in the face of crisis situations. It remains to be seen, writes the author, whether "*the German university (in the collective sense of the term) will resist or capitulate unconditionally*" in the current context⁹⁷.

5.2 Warning signs in France

Assessing the state of academic freedom in France is a particularly delicate task, as it is generally easier to point the finger at abuses observed abroad than to acknowledge one's own weaknesses. On the other hand, the subject has become so politically charged that it is now virtually impossible to talk about it freely or to be heard without being misrepresented or accused of ulterior motives. This observation is revealing.

Is the French university system, as some insistently claim, infected by ideological systems such as the so-called "Islamism" or "wokism"? What was originally a controversial slogan has gradually turned into a matter of state, prompting public statements, opinion pieces, official reports, and hearings in the Senate and the National Assembly. These arguments, always polarized, call for an informed and contextualized analysis since, in their daily practice, most teachers and researchers do not recognize themselves in the terms of this debate or in the accusations levelled against them. On the one hand, a small group of academics, politicians, and media outlets seem to believe in the existence of an ideological divide within the university. On the other, a large majority of academic and social actors denounce caricatural ideological labeling, perceived as a political offensive against the autonomy of the academic world, whose motives are reminiscent of certain forms of populist, even Trumpist, rhetoric.

In February 2021, France Universités (former Conference of University Presidents) issued a very clear statement expressing its "astonishment" and deploring the then minister's use of a "pseudo-concept" that had been "popularized by the far right." Thus, "using their words is to play into the hands of traditional prosecutors who are quick to condemn academics and universities on principle". France Universités marked its surprise at the "instrumentalization of

⁹⁷ See *Humanisme*, 2020/4 (No. 329), pp. 68-76.

the CNRS” which also spoke out while being violently attacked much like the universities⁹⁸. The CNRS had published a very clear statement, which itself was strongly attacked: it essentially noted that the controversy surrounding the so-called “Islamism” and its political exploitation are emblematic of a regrettable instrumentalization of science. *“It is neither the first nor the last, and it concerns many sectors beyond the humanities and social sciences. However, there are other ways to move forward, through further research, the clarification of methodologies, and the publication of research results. This is also the mission of the CNRS”*⁹⁹. The controversy resurfaced in the summer of 2021, when the Minister of Higher Education and Research, Philippe Baptiste, stated that “Islamism” is not an academic term, *“it is not even well defined, so this concept does not exist. (...) To say that there is an Islamism movement that wants to take power within this or that university, no, I don't believe that's the reality”*. The minister confirmed his position on the airwaves: *“Islamism does not exist in universities, not in a structured and visible way”*. These comments immediately provoked a virulent reaction from the former Minister of National Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, who believes that, even if the term lacks a scientific definition, it nevertheless refers to *“an undeniable social fact”*. He concluded: *“To say that WRR does not exist is like saying that the Earth is flat”*.

This type of analogy reveals the resolutely polarized nature of a controversy in which ideological positions take precedence over empirical analysis. This is however the task undertaken in the following analysis, based on a set of references listed in the bibliography. We will identify recent categories of attacks on academic freedom in France, without omitting foreign interference, mainly from outside Europe, which has been recently documented. Finally, particular attention will be paid to the impact of the Israeli Palestinian war on academic freedom in France, given that war situations, highly emotionally and politically charged, can profoundly disrupt the scientific ecosystem.

In this light, the situation of French universities is revealed in its complexity: solid and rooted in a long tradition, universities are subject to internal and external tensions in a position to undermine their stability. These tensions do not reflect genuine scientific disagreements as much as they reveal a broader political divide: the place of critical knowledge in our societies and the role that research should, or not, play in transforming the social world.

5.2.1 *New Ancients v Moderns quarrels*

In France, as in the United States, critics of “wokism” particularly in the social sciences, use partly similar arguments: defense of academic tradition, accusation of alleged “leftism” and condemnation of the internationalization, if not Americanization, of French universities. The Observatory of Decolonialism, created in January 2021 is among the most visible actors in this denunciation of supposed “ideological militancy” in higher education and research. This collective has since expanded its activities and changed its name, becoming successively the Observatory of Identitarian Ideologies, then the Observatory of University Ethics. The Observatory presents itself as a collective of researchers *“freely associated on the basis of a shared observation of the disintegration of disciplines in higher education”* united by a desire to document, analyze, and combat the “phenomenon of decolonialism.” The Observatory claims

⁹⁸ See “Islamism”: putting an end to confusion and fruitless controversy, press release from France Universités, February 16, 2021: <https://franceuniversites.fr/actualite/islamisme-stopper-la-confusion-et-les-polemiques-steriles/>

⁹⁹ CNRS. (2021, February 17). “Islamism” is not a scientific reality (press release): <https://www.cnrs.fr/fr/presse/l-islamogauchisme-nest-pas-une-realite-scientifique>

to use irony as an educational tool, rejects the need for institutional recognition, and presents itself as a whistleblower against what it considers to be militant excesses in the academic world. To date, the Observatory has received significant media coverage and exerted considerable political influence in a context marked by heated debates on colonial history, secularism, and gender equality. The Observatory's report, and its website (decolonialisme.fr), occupy a central place in the contemporary rhetoric denouncing critical approaches in the humanities and social sciences.

In a report, the collective asserts that certain critical approaches, particularly gender studies, critical race studies, and postcolonial studies, have gained a dominant position in the French humanities and social sciences, to the detriment of “*traditional scientific disciplines*”¹⁰⁰ In March 2021, in a *Le Figaro* op-ed, three of its founding members estimated that “*decolonial and identity ideologies*” make up almost a quarter of research in the humanities and social sciences¹⁰¹. This would represent a break with the structuralist heritage and a reversal of the principles of universality of knowledge, leading to a transformation of scientific discourse into militant discourse. The authors of the report argue that this disciplinary shift would have a significant impact on French language teaching, literature, and culture, as well as on the training of future teachers, by the promotion of “racialist,” “indigenist,” and even “separatist” narratives, even in secondary education.

The report targets certain undergraduate courses, for instance in modern literature, which challenge the “literary canon” by promoting texts by racialized authors or authors with a colonial background. University programs, courses, and even teachers are specifically named. The authors put forward the notion of a widespread intimidation climate within universities, in which researchers critical of these developments no longer dare to express themselves freely. They call for the creation of an academic and public counter-narrative, capable of defending republican values, threatened by ideologies viewed as disruptive to national unity. The report restates a traditionalist vision of the university, based on a hierarchy of knowledge centered on classical disciplines (physics, literature, history) and competitive examinations, chairs, and degrees that legitimize its intellectual authority. In this context, in February 2021, the then Minister of Higher Education, Frédérique Vidal, announced “*an investigation into Islamo-leftism*” at the university. This investigation, to date, has not been carried out.

It is also worth revisiting the highly publicized “After Deconstruction: Rebuilding Science and Culture”¹⁰² symposium at the Sorbonne on January 7 and 8, 2022. Organized by the College of Philosophy with the support of the Secularism and Republic committee (Comité Laïcité République), it was held in a highly symbolic location of academic knowledge, the cradle of the university in the Middle Ages and the scene of the socio-political revolution of May 1968. According to Mr. Pierre-Henri Tavoillot (lecturer in philosophy at the Faculty of Arts of Sorbonne University, president of the College of Philosophy), the conference aimed to “*break out of contemporary groupthink*” accused of being dominated by “wokism, neo-feminism, ecofeminism, intersectionality, and cancel culture” all of which are forms of hegemonic

¹⁰⁰ See Observatory of Decolonialism and Identity Ideologies. (2021, May 10). *Report on Ideological Manifestations in Universities and Research*. Edited by Xavier-Laurent Salvador. Report written by a team of volunteer members of the Observatory. <https://www.decolonialisme.fr/rapport/2021/rapport2021.pdf>

¹⁰¹ Salvador, X.-L., Szlamowicz, J., & Bikfalvi, A. (2021, March 26). *Decolonialism and identity ideologies account for a quarter of research in the humanities today*.

¹⁰² *After Deconstruction: The University Challenged by Ideologies*: Proceedings of the symposium organized at the Sorbonne on January 7 and 8, 2022, by the Observatory of Decolonialism and the College of Philosophy, Odile Jacob, 2023

“deconstructionism”. Faced with this supposed domination, the organizers called for a *“humanist, rational, and universalist”* intellectual reorientation, breaking with the legacy of May 1968. Throughout the conference, philosopher Jacques Derrida and emblematic figure of deconstruction was frequently targeted, alongside the *“philosophers of suspicion”* (Nietzsche, Freud, Marx), accused of undermining the foundations of Western thought. P.H. Tavoillot proposed a three-stage genealogy of this intellectual deconstruction: a modern phase (from Descartes to Kant) that subverted tradition and theology; a phase of suspicion, which aimed to dismantle human institutions; and finally, a “moment 68” when deconstruction became systematic, albeit without any constructive purpose. Mr. Jean-Michel Blanquer opened the conference and was, at the time, met with fierce criticism within the academic world. His logistical and financial support, as well as his opening speech, were perceived as an explicit attempt to regain ideological control of French universities. What does the opposing side argue?

The Observatory's report claims to tackle subjective activism in research and reaffirm the principles of academic neutrality. It remains “an activist act”, driven by a normative aim to decide the legitimacy of scholarly productions. By claiming epistemic activism, it constructs a prescriptive narrative on what science should be, while disqualifying *a priori* certain approaches (gender, race, and postcolonial studies) on ideological grounds. This text is less a scientific analysis than a manifesto, with the following characteristic features: an overt nostalgia for a mythical university, “universalist” in the Western sense of the term, hierarchical, idealized as a sanctuary of “pure knowledge.” Often, in the text, quotations are taken out of context or their real weight in the academic corpus dismissed. Strongly connoted semantics, marked by fear and denunciation, is used: *“ideological influence”*, *“indigenist discourse”*, *“domination”*, *“separatism”*, *“dislocation of the Nation”*. Generalizations with little empirical support are drawn from isolated and uncontextualized examples (a course brochure at Paris 8, a subsection of a syllabus at Sciences Po) and extrapolated to the entire academic field.

Philosophie Magazine devoted a special issue entitled “Deconstruction” in February 2022 to several analyses of the Sorbonne Colloquium. It criticized many of the event’s statements for their lack of scientific rigor, noting that several speakers went beyond their disciplinary expertise to make essentially political statements. The total absence of dissenting voices reinforced the impression of a witch hunt: critical social sciences and humanities were reduced to a political ideology described as *“totalitarian”* or *“ethnocidal”*. In the words of philosopher Jean-Christophe Goddard (University of Toulouse 2): *“A conference is a space for controversy. This event was about identifying enemies”*. Several speakers were all but researchers or did not have peer-reviewed scientific publications in the fields discussed. This reinforced the feeling of an ideological orchestrated scene within the university itself.

“Is ‘wokism’ a humanism?” features a debate between Norman Ajari (PhD in philosophy, lecturer in Francophone Black Studies at the University of Edinburgh), and Pierre Valentin. Mr Norman Ajari defends deconstruction as an emancipatory approach, rooted in the humanist tradition and focused on social justice. Pierre Valentin, on the other hand, warns against the ideological excesses of woke deconstructionism, which he perceives as dogmatic, moralizing, and hostile to contradiction. This obsession with the question of deconstructionism is surprising: no reflection is produced on, for instance, the impact of AI in education, the notable absence of interdisciplinarity in training, the lack of training on climate issues, or the need for French universities to change scale and internationalize in order to remain players in global science. The debate highlights the difficulty of maintaining an open space for discussion between camps that accuse each other of Manichaeism and intellectual closed-mindedness.

For its defenders, deconstruction is an indispensable critical tool: it allows us to question implicit power structures, reveal biases embedded in dominant discourses, and pave the way for a more inclusive and egalitarian rethinking of social relations. Let us return to the philosophical origins of the concept. The term was first outlined by Martin Heidegger, who undertook to “deconstruct” the history of Western metaphysics to uncover its implicit foundations. Jacques Derrida formalized the concept in the 1960s and 1970s in his major works (*Of Grammatology*, *Speech and Phenomena*, *Writing and Difference*). For Derrida, deconstruction is not an act of destruction, but an analytical gesture aimed at uncovering the implicit hierarchies, structuring dichotomies (nature/culture, man/woman, subject/object), and logics of exclusion that run through texts and concepts.

This theoretical complexity has been greatly simplified, even instrumentalized, in public debates. On the one hand, some critics equate deconstruction with generalized relativism or postmodern nihilism. On the other hand, its proponents insist on its critical power and its ability to think differently about contemporary forms of oppression. Opposition to the woke thesis is also being organized through public statements. In a *Le Monde* op-ed “*No, anti-wokism does not serve democracy*” on May 3, 2023, a group of researchers responded after the 2022 Sorbonne conference. The authors denounced the jumbling of the concept of deconstruction with the idea of a threat to civilization. They point out that contemporary critics ignore the complexity of the texts, notably those of Jacques Derrida, as well as the intellectual traditions from which they originate. They defend the legitimacy of gender studies and postcolonial studies, often wrongly equated with wokism, when in fact they are part of rigorous, fruitful fields of research recognized throughout the world. Hostility towards deconstruction, they point out, is not new: it was first expressed in conservative American circles, notably in the writings of Samuel Huntington. French anti-woke narrative belongs to this ideological lineage, under the guise of the defense of an alleged “*French rationality*”. Far from strengthening democracy, anti-wokism fuels a new type of authoritarianism, which some do not hesitate to describe as neo-fascist: “*it is not wokism that threatens democracy, but anti-wokism itself*”.

In “*The Fallacies of Anti-Decolonialism*”¹⁰³ Gilles Bastin (SciencesPo Grenoble) published a point-by-point response to the Observatory of Decolonialism's op-ed in *Le Figaro* cited above. According to the sociologist, this text employs a series of fallacious rhetorical devices, incompatible with the standards of intellectual rigor expected in science. He identifies several emblematic stances of polemical mechanisms geared toward disqualification rather than understanding. His main arguments are as follows. First, in addition to *ad hominem* attacks, the text critics are not based on the analysis of scientific publications or positions, but rather an attempt at disqualification through mockery, out-of-context excerpts, and personal denigration. Academics such as Ms. Nahema Hanafi (lecturer at Angers), Ms. Nonna Mayer (political scientist, emeritus CNRS/CEVIPOF) and Mr. Albin Wagener (Catholic University of Lille) have been targeted, but their scientific work never seriously discussed. Secondly, the construction of caricatured figures, through which the authors attribute supposedly “*decolonial*” or “*identitarian*” positions, which they then associate with various extremist forms. These fictional figures serve as “*counterpoints*” allowing the authors to position themselves as defenders of “*neutral*” and “*objective*” science, opposed to what they present as an ideological drift, without ever confronting these representations with the reality of academic work. Parodic portrayals associating so-called “*decolonial*” social sciences with the character of Hitler aim to ridicule them by suggesting, through absurdity, that academic anti-racism is

¹⁰³ Bastin, G. (2021, April 7). *The fallacies of anti-decolonialism*. HAL. <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03989913/document>

part of a totalitarian logic. Furthermore, the Observatory seeks to disqualify these approaches by evading substantial criticisms levelled against it. This process is part of a diversionary strategy based on exaggeration and grotesque analogy. More broadly, it is an introduction of modes of intervention borrowed from the contemporary far right (notably, the alt-right¹⁰⁴) into the academic field and concealed behind a French republican narrative. In addition, the strategy entails hammering home the same accusations across various channels (forums, media, social networks) without rigorous empirical evidence. This is not a scientific debate, but a saturation tactic aimed at imposing an ideological framework of interpretation in the public sphere. In addition, “cherry picking” or “selection bias” methods are widespread: isolating a few marginal or atypical examples and presenting them as generalized symptoms. This process ignores the diversity of approaches, disciplines, and methods in the social sciences and humanities, and only projects a homogenizing vision designed to validate the Observatory's ideological hypotheses. Finally, the authors argue that 50% of publications and 25% of events or blogs in the social sciences and humanities are linked to “*decolonial ideologies*”. These striking figures are based on easily provable methodological biases, notes Mr. Bastin. The corpus selected aggregates occurrences of terms such as “*gender*”, “*race*”, “*intersectionality*”, “*discrimination*” and “*postcolonial*” without analyzing their meaning or context of use. Research on “*literary genre*”, “*discrimination between samples*”, and even texts written by members of the Observatory themselves are included in the sample analyzed, which profoundly distorts its interpretation. This approach is reinforced by the manipulation of figures. The figure of 25% appears as an “*average*” of estimates ranging from 0.01% to 50%, with no methodological link, resulting in an artificially consensual result. This operation conceals a total lack of statistical rigor and aims to give a scientific veneer to a fundamentally biased demonstration.

Not to mention that the analysis relies almost exclusively on OpenEdition platforms, notably the *Hypothèses* blogs and *Calenda* announcements¹⁰⁵, which represent only a very specific fraction of academic activity. Peer-reviewed publications in major scientific journals are simply ignored. Terms such as “*racism*” or “*discrimination*” are interpreted as ideological markers, betraying a desire to delegitimize the very possibility of scientifically studying social inequalities. Finally, the text deliberately ignores existing work in bibliometrics and sociology of science. Recent empirical analyses have confirmed the marginality of the trends targeted by critics of “*decolonialism*”. Albin Wagener analyzed the frequency of terms such as “*decolonial*”, “*intersectional*”, “*racialized*” and “*Islamogauchisme*” in various databases (theses.fr, HAL, Cairn, OpenEdition) and concluded that, while their presence is certainly growing, they remain very much a minority: 0.2% of theses in 2020, 3.5% of publications on OpenEdition, and 0.06% in HAL. David Chavalarias, based on an analysis of 11 million Twitter accounts, shows that the term “*Islamogauchisme*” and its variants appear in only 0.019% of original tweets¹⁰⁶.

For its detractors, the work carried out by the Observatory of Decolonialism contributes to the weakening of academic freedom. It creates a climate of mistrust and intimidation, which discourages researchers from addressing certain sensitive topics or speaking out publicly.

¹⁰⁴ See in particular Maxime Dafaure's PhD, Gustave Eiffel University: <https://www.univ-gustave-eiffel.fr/luniversite/pages-speciales/vue-detaillee/l-alt-right-resurgence-digitale-de-lextreme-droite-americaine-entre-ideologie-et-technologie-au-coeur-de-la-these-de-maxime-dafaure-doctorant-et-enseignant-a-luniversite-gustave-eiffel>

¹⁰⁵ See <https://calenda.org/>

¹⁰⁶ Wagener, Albin. *The frog that wanted to be as big as the ox*, published on March 1, 2021, in the *Hypothèses Systèmes de discours* blog. [Online]: <https://sysdiscours.hypotheses.org/352>; CHAVALARIAS, David. “Islamogauchisme”: the Alt-right trap closes in on Macronie, 2021. [Online]: <https://david.chavalarias.com/islamogauchisme-le-piege-de-lalt-right-se-referme-sur-la-macronie/>

Scientific debate, based on a plurality of approaches, is giving way to a logic of accusation. This dynamic has a threefold effect: a decline in intellectual freedom in academic institutions, growing self-censorship among teachers, and a weakening of our collective ability to produce critical knowledge of social relations.

5.2.2 Internal and external interference

In its report on academic freedom for the years 2022-2023, the European Parliament identifies several potential threats to freedom of study, research, and teaching in France. These are essentially of a political, academic, and societal nature. While some of these threats are common to other European countries, particularly when related to the post-COVID context, others seem more specific to France. Also, the creation in March 2023 by the French Political Science Association (AFSP) of the Observatory of Attacks on Academic Freedom (OALA) testifies both to the seriousness of the tensions affecting this fundamental principle and to the academic community's determination to respond to them in a resolute and informed manner. The ESR Ethics Council¹⁰⁷ in its March 2024 opinion on the public expression of teacher-researchers, recognizes that *“academic freedom is (...) threatened in many countries, sometimes intensely, but also, more frequently, in a diffuse manner”*. It stresses the need to strengthen its protection, particularly in periods of increased vulnerability, such as during recruitment or fundraising phases. In a context of increased polarization in the scientific world, when tensions are running high, many academics are questioning the limits of what they can legitimately say or write, even when they know they have the right, or even the duty, to do so. It is therefore essential to provide them with clear guidelines based on the principles of academic ethics. Recent statements by prominent figures in the French academic world are part of this effort to clarify the situation. Yassine Lakhnech, president of the University of Grenoble Alpes, stated: *“For some time now, attacks on academic freedom have been on the rise. They take various forms, some more visible than others: political pressure, challenges to institutional autonomy, attempts to control research or teaching content. Attacks on academic freedom that arise at the very heart of universities must be given special attention”*¹⁰⁸.

Infringements recorded in France are very varied and contrasting. For instance, the ESR Ethics Council is regularly called upon to deal with cases where warnings and even disciplinary measures must be considered against academics themselves. Some French researchers have been deprived of their liberty abroad. Others have been denied access to their field of research or have been expelled from third countries. Strategic rivalries have led to an increase in foreign interference in the collection, processing, or storage of data, as highlighted in Senator Gattolin's report (see box below).

The academic world remains deeply marked by the impromptu, highly publicized, and symbolically violent intervention of Mr. Gabriel Attal, then Prime Minister, during a board meeting at Sciences Po Paris in March 2024. His remarks in no way sought to support teachers and researchers in their educational mission but rather denounced them with the scathing metaphor: *“the fish always rots from the head down”*. They provoked a unanimous reaction from the teaching community¹⁰⁹. A solemn response was drafted by Réjane Sénac, Paul-André

¹⁰⁷ See <https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/fr/le-college-de-deontologie-87733>

¹⁰⁸ See AEF Dispatch No. 729994, April 15, 2025.

¹⁰⁹ See https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2024/03/18/a-sciences-po-la-reponse-agacee-des-directeurs-et-doyens-apres-la-visite-inopinée-de-gabriel-attal_6222768_3224.html

Rosental, Philippe Coulangeon, and the author of this report, then signed by a unanimous permanent faculty, firmly reiterated the following fundamental principles:

“No politician can afford to undermine the fundamental principles of academic independence and freedom, as enshrined in the laws of the Republic. It should be remembered that academic freedom guarantees the right to teach and conduct research in complete independence, under the control and supervision of peers, without interference from any external authority, including the State. Like freedom of the press for journalists, this principle underpins the legitimacy of academic work, based on evidence and refutable reasoning. The references to a possible “takeover” of our institution, made during the board meeting on March 13, blatantly contravene this cardinal principle. In a liberal democracy, the defense of academic freedom must be an absolute priority, particularly to refocus public debate on facts and knowledge”¹¹⁰.

Other political intrusions have taken place. Some French local authorities have conditioned the granting of public subsidies for teaching, research, and student scholarships on the adoption of charters that implicitly suggest that universities do not fulfill their legal and civic obligations. For the first time, political criticism of higher education institutions has resulted in concrete retaliatory measures, notably of a financial nature. For instance, on March 17, 2022, the president of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region, Laurent Wauquiez, submitted a “Charter for the Defense of French Values and Secularism” to the local council, conditioning the allocation of regional subsidies to his principles. In the Île-de-France region, a six article “Republican Charter for Higher Education Institutions” was adopted by the Regional Council's standing committee in November 2024¹¹¹. In the spirit of its drafters, this charter aims to “reaffirm the law” and “enforce the laws of the Republic” (art. 1) as well as “freedom of expression under conditions that do not interfere with teaching and research activities and do not disturb public order”. In a joint statement dated November 28, 2024, the French Sociological Association (AFS) and the French Political Science Association (AFSP) expressed their “deep concern” in the following terms: “Not only does this charter deliberately ignore the independence granted to teacher-researchers, but it also states the obvious by reiterating self-evident principles (such as ‘the primacy of scientific fact’, in art. 2), thus suggesting that university professors do not respect them, or worse, that they produce opinions instead of scientific knowledge” and “contradicts the very spirit of academic freedom and freedom of expression that the university seeks to defend”¹¹².

By claiming to set ideological guidelines for “good science” these normative measures contribute to delegitimize the autonomy of researchers, undermine the conditions for critical research, and create a climate of suspicion incompatible with the principles of scientific democracy. This shift marks a paradigm change: no longer a mere hostile expression directed at the university, but the usage of political and legal instruments designed to monitor, control, and even sanction it.

The work carried out in this report has revealed that academics in France are gradually being deprived of this essential freedom by the very people who accuse them of not respecting it. We find ourselves at a deadlock: on the one hand, academics are seeking ways to defend the fundamental value of academic freedom from the state or its supervisory bodies, while some of

¹¹⁰ At the time, the text of the permanent faculty has not been published in the media yet. It can be viewed on several websites, including: <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/les-invites-de-mediapart/blog/190324/sciences-po-aucun-responsable-politique-ne-saurait-s-arroger-le-droit-de-de-valoriser>

¹¹¹ See Ile de France Regional Council, report no. CP 2024-370, November 14, 2024.

¹¹² See <https://www.afsp.info/communiqu-28-novembre-2024-contre-la-charte-regionale-republicaine/>

these same actors are siding with groups that consider academics to be primarily responsible for its erosion. While academic freedom is directly threatened today by actors with varying and plural interests, political authorities (government, assemblies, ministries) have for a time claimed to defend academic freedom, considering that public universities (some specifically, but essentially all) are subservient to groups from the extreme fringes of the political spectrum. To recognize this crisis in no way weakens the university institution: on the contrary, it demonstrates a strengthened commitment to a free scientific community.

Box 6 “Extra-European State Influence” Senator André Gattolin Report¹¹³

A parliamentary fact-finding mission, was created in July 2021 by the Rally of Democrats, Progressives, and Independents (RDPI) group, chaired by Mr. Étienne Blanc (LR, Rhône) with rapporteur Mr. André Gattolin (RDPI, Hauts-de-Seine). It identified a growing threat to higher education institutions, documented through more than thirty hearings (including mine in the fall of 2021). This report calls for increased vigilance and the implementation of a proactive strategy to ensure compliance with academic independence and freedom of research in France. It highlights the need for collective mobilization for international engagement in the higher education sector, emphasizing the importance of finding a balance between openness and protection.

This report is a useful resource for stakeholders involved in ESR policies, in an international context marked by intensifying scientific competition and technological warfare.

It shows how French research and higher education sector is exposed to influence strategies carried out by foreign powers. These strategies, often systematic, can cross the line into interference and affect scientific sovereignty. They are based on two main approaches: the first consists of steering the humanities and social sciences in a direction that favors the state concerned; the second aims to gain access to sensitive scientific or technological data, sometimes protected by intellectual property regimes or subject to economic or military considerations.

The instruments used in these strategies range from traditional academic cooperation to more direct forms of pressure. They may include targeted project funding, the selection of institutional partners, or the usage of bilateral agreements. The People's Republic of China has the most structured capacity to pursue this type of strategy in the long term, due to its resources and the centralization of its political and academic apparatus. Other states are also active in this area, notably Russia, Turkey, and certain Gulf countries. The report also warns of increasingly frequent instances of self-censorship in academic circles, particularly on subjects considered sensitive by certain foreign partners, which may affect freedom of research.

The report proposes an analytical and operational framework to address these issues. It also makes 26 recommendations aimed at strengthening France's capacity to respond to them, including preserving scientific heritage, protecting academic freedom, guaranteeing the

¹¹³ See <https://www.senat.fr/salle-de-presse/dossiers-de-presse-2021-2022/influences-etatiques-extra-europeennes.html>

integrity of research, ensuring the security of sensitive data, and improving institutional coordination.

The text recommends enhanced coordination between higher education institutions, public authorities, and research bodies to better anticipate risks. The current public system, in particular the policy for the protection of scientific and technical potential (PPST), has significant shortcomings. Its scope is narrow and does not sufficiently consider attacks on academic freedom or scientific integrity. The lack of effective coordination between institutional actors, combined with poor information flow, often leaves institutions and researchers alone in facing these threats.

It must be noted that, four years after the report's publication, the measures implemented still fall far short of the list recommendations.

5.2.3 *Academic freedom in France in the context of the Israeli Palestinian war*

The French government's response to the Hamas terrorist attacks on October 7, 2023, was immediate, as was the case for most European governments. The Minister of Higher Education, Sylvie Retailleau, issued a directive on October 9 to university presidents asking them to identify individuals suspected of supporting Hamas : "In recent hours, we have observed particularly indecent actions and comments from associations, collectives, and sometimes individuals within our institutions. The glorification of terrorism and inciting hatred, violence, or discrimination are prohibited by law and must be punished," she wrote. The presidents have repeatedly reiterated their commitment to combating anti-Semitism and all forms of discrimination. On October 12, the CNRS published a letter reiterating the framework of freedom of expression, while warning of the risks of sanctions in the event of violations, particularly for condoning terrorism or violating memorial laws.

We are fully aware of the particularly sensitive nature of the subject and have chosen to rely on the (few) works of academics who are attempting to objectify the situation with rigor. Laurent Bonnefoy (CNRS/Sciences Po), a recognized specialist on Yemen and the Middle East who has lived in the region for many years, offers an initial analysis of how this conflict is affecting the French academic world in his "*French academia, Gaza and Israel after October 7, 2023. A critical assessment*" article¹¹⁴. His work shows how structural obstacles have long limited research on Palestine, with the Israeli state notably prohibiting access to the Gaza Strip for foreign researchers, including French academics. Repressive practices were regularly reported: prolonged interrogations at borders, body searches, seizure of electronic equipment, and even refusal of entry into the country, particularly at Ben Gurion Airport and the Allenby Bridge. Researchers working on Palestinian society or expressing criticism of Israeli policy have always been recurring targets. A climate of widespread surveillance prevailed, in which any criticism of Israel could lead to public accusations of anti-Semitism, sometimes relayed in French political debate. The emblematic case of Edgar Morin, who was prosecuted in 2002 for a collective opinion piece published in *Le Monde* (*Israel Palestine: a cancer*¹¹⁵) illustrates a context in which even renowned intellectuals can be prosecuted for their analyses. Two

¹¹⁴ *Op.cit*, 2024.

¹¹⁵ See https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2002/06/03/israel-palestine-le-cancer-par-edgar-morin-sami-nair-et-daniele-sallenave_278484_1819218.html

associations had sued him for anti-Semitism, but after four years of legal proceedings, the Court of Cassation definitively overturned the conviction for “racial defamation” in 2006, ruling that the article fell within the scope of freedom of expression and criticism of the policies of the Israeli state, and not of the entire Jewish community. Edgar Morin argued that his comments had been taken out of context and were aimed at the policies of the occupying forces, while his detractors denounced what they considered to be dangerous generalizations.

Some controversies highlighted the growing polarization of the intellectual sphere more than others. Conferences were canceled, as in Montpellier; disciplinary sanctions were taken against several academics; and the book by Israeli renowned professor of political science at the University of Haifa historian Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, was withdrawn from the Fayard publishing catalog. In some cases, teachers and researchers have been forced to resign from certain institutional positions after posting on social media. This climate has encouraged the spread of denunciation practices, with colleagues publicly denouncing other researchers and contributing to the deterioration of academic debate.

In response to this situation, petitions have been launched, and publications such as the *Libacapal* (Academic Freedoms on Palestine) newsletter are attempting to document attacks on academic freedoms in France and abroad. In the context of the dramatic consequences for Palestinian universities, programs to welcome academics from Gaza, such as the national PAUSE program, have managed to endure. Since 2017, PAUSE, supported by the MESR, has been protecting and hosting researchers and artists who can no longer pursue their activities in their country of origin due to war, political persecution, or censorship. It facilitates their reception for periods long enough to allow them to settle in, continue their work, and bring their families to safety.

Didier Fassin, professor at the Collège de France, compared in an article the situation in Gaza to the genocide of the Herero people by the Germans in the early 20th century in today's Namibia¹¹⁶. It drew sharp criticism from Luc Boltanski and Dany Trom, among others, who denounced it as “a classic anti-Semitic gesture”¹¹⁷. The controversy proved intense. A general climate of suspicion now hangs over academic freedom: criticism of Israel can easily be equated with anti-Semitism, leading to increased self-censorship in academic circles, and France is no exception. Several legal instruments are being used to this end, including the 2014 law on Incitement to terrorism and various memorial laws. Two converging dynamics are at play: on the one hand, the political offensive against critical approaches, analyzed above, and on the other, a security logic reinforced by anti-terrorism measures that insidiously target the public expression of researchers. We chose not to address the issue of the evacuation by law enforcement of pro-Palestinian student groups in several French higher education institutions, as this subject relates to students' freedom of expression and not to academic freedom *per se*. However, the line between the two is blurred. On the other hand, certain teachings have been accused of promoting anti-Semitism or terrorism and have weakened the institutions position, without providing tangible evidence of bias in their academic work. Researcher points out¹¹⁸ that the establishment of informal but highly controlled structures to monitor the expression of university teachers, for example through the dissemination of unauthorized video or audio

¹¹⁶ Didier Fassin, « Le spectre d'un génocide à Gaza », *AOC* (Analyse Opinion Critique), November 1st 2023 : <https://aoc.media/opinion/2023/10/31/le-spectre-dun-genocide-a-gaza/>

¹¹⁷ See <https://aoc.media/opinion/2023/11/12/un-genocide-a-gaza-une-reponse-a-didier-fassin/>
<https://www.philomag.com/articles/genocide-gaza-eva-illouz-repond-didier-fassin>

¹¹⁸ See <https://www.meforum.org/campus-watch>

recordings of lectures on social media, seems to follow the path laid out two decades ago in the United States with the creation of the Campus Watch network.

War situations profoundly transform all professional environments, including the academic world. The War on Gaza and Middle East Political Science project launched in 2024 by Marc Lynch at George Washington University is one of the few rigorous attempts to date to analyze the direct impact of war on the concrete conditions of knowledge production. In such contexts, researchers are never perceived as mere observers. They become, despite themselves, full-fledged actors. Their position is shaped by the logic of polarization, alignment, or exclusion, and may itself reinforce or challenge these dynamics. Armed conflicts also give rise to a specific economy of expertise. Certain topics are suddenly given increased academic value. New funding, career opportunities, and greater public visibility are concentrated on research topics deemed relevant in the strategic or ideological context of the moment.

These transformations create a set of serious dilemmas. Access to the field is often precarious, and tensions between engagement and distancing become difficult to sustain. Added to this are the covert but explicit pressures exerted by the institutions that fund research. As the demand for expertise intensifies in contexts of violence, it is accompanied by increasingly marked political oversight, which constrains researchers and shapes the very conditions of knowledge. Anyone claiming to genuinely analyze the situation in universities since the outbreak of the current decade wars, particularly in the Near and Middle East, cannot and should not ignore these dynamics. Consequently, many universities around the world, as in France, are now waking up to find their faculties and departments fractured, not so much because of events on campus itself, but because of the political and media exploitation to which they have been subjected.

As noted previously, the political and legal culture of academic freedom in France is in reality very limited. As Camille Fernandes points out, there is a “*singularity in the French approach to university law, the formal sources of which raise serious difficulties*”¹¹⁹. A significant portion of politicians and public opinion denounce what they see as an increased academic corporatism. The reality, however, is that there is widespread disinterest in the subject of academic freedom among teacher-researchers, either because they consider its defense to be obvious and natural or because they are unaware of the dangers it faces. In rare cases, academics spontaneously defend academic freedom when it is directly at stake, unlike, for example, journalists, who systematically campaign for their professional rights. Unlike journalists, academics do not have a strong, common founding text, such as Zola's “*J'accuse...!*”: “[...] *And the act I am doing here is just a revolutionary way to hasten the explosion of truth and justice. I have only one passion, that of light, in the name of humanity which has suffered so much, and which has the right to happiness. My fiery protest is only the cry of my soul* [...]”¹²⁰.

8. Attacks on academic freedom: structural reasons

Attacks on academic freedom are a global and growing phenomenon, although they manifest themselves differently depending on the degree of illiberalism in each society. How can we explain this dynamic?

¹¹⁹ “*Academic freedoms in France, Public law study on the submission of teachers and researchers to the general status of civil servants*” 2017, University of Burgundy, p.12.

¹²⁰ January 13, 1898, *L'Aurore*, front page.

Some of the main causes that may shed light on this worrying deterioration are presented below. As we emphasized in our introduction, freedom of knowledge and the ability of academics to practice their profession freely are by no means isolated issues. On the contrary, they are part of a broader context of regression in fundamental freedoms, particularly freedom of expression. These attacks are now occurring within long-established democracies, which were previously perceived as strongholds of intellectual freedom. It is worrying and unprecedented.

One explanation is the proliferation of functions assigned to increasingly interconnected contemporary universities, due to the internationalization of university policies. This happens in a context of growing illiberalism and populism. Media concentration favors the manipulation of information that promotes an increasingly authoritarian dominant ideology, and we are witnessing the relentless intrusion of social media into lecture halls, classrooms, and teachers' offices. Universities are required to perform functions that are often difficult to reconcile, usually with limited resources or, when support is provided, mainly of a legal and defensive nature. As centers of education and knowledge transfer, they must also position themselves as spaces for debate on major contemporary geo-socio-political issues, while being called upon to play a mediating, even pacifying, role in the face of the tensions that these debates can generate within civil society.

At the same time, student mobilization is increasingly structured around transnational issues. These can be grouped into three main categories: environmental causes, foremost among which are the fight against climate change and for climate justice; social and cultural demands, such as the denunciation of systemic discrimination, gender equality, the questioning of postcolonial legacies, and the defense of migrants' rights; and finally, political and institutional struggles, notably opposition to contemporary armed conflicts and the fight against corruption, as recently demonstrated by student protests in Serbia¹²¹.

These are issues that certain media narratives, marked by lazy and/or ideologized rhetoric, quickly dismiss by lumping them together under the catch-all label of “wokism.” This situation reflects a widespread intolerance towards the public expression of political views, contrasting with a much greater acceptance of these same views when they are expressed in the new media space of social networks. However, these mobilizations reflect a legitimate generational unease on many societal issues, fueled by a deep sense of separation with previous generations. Current demonstrations for or against specific geopolitical contexts, a classic phenomenon in the academic world, are frequently compared to major student movements of the fall of 1965 against the Vietnam War or those of May 1968.

This phenomenon fits into a political and media system that tend to reduce the public debate into hysterics, contributing to a form of extreme polarization from which escaping in the realm of ideas is impossible. Worrying forms of interference only worsens the picture: on the one hand, foreign pressure is exerted on national scientific production; on the other, increased restrictions on access to the field (visa refusals) or violence perpetrated against researchers in many parts of the world. Finally, research is confronted with the activism of industrial, religious, or financial powerful lobbies, the rise of post-truth, and the proliferation of widely disseminated anti-science discourse.

¹²¹ See “*Revolt in Serbia: the history of the movement and the students' demands*” *Le Courrier des Balkans*, June 30, 2025, as well as: https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2025/04/15/manifestations-en-serbie-les-etudiants-bloquent-la-radio-television-publique_6596235_3210.html

Furthermore, new conditions for research production, also contribute to undermining the principle of academic freedom. These developments include the widespread adoption of open science, the rise of artificial intelligence, the gradual disembodiment of the university as a place of knowledge, accentuated since the Covid-19 pandemic by the proliferation of hybrid or distance learning formats, and the growing pressure for the university to remain a supposedly “neutral” space, sheltered from divisive societal conflicts.

A word on open science: its aims to legitimately strengthen transparency, reproducibility, and accessibility of knowledge, raises new tensions in the same movement. Several recent cases brought to the attention of the Ethics Council empirically illustrate the dilemmas created by these demands for openness: they raise the question of calling researchers to order in the name of ethical, disciplinary, or institutional principles, when their work, deemed partisan or controversial, circulates freely in the public sphere.

The contrast between the general dominance of science and mathematics (STEM) and the decline of the humanities and social sciences must be noted. Humanities and social sciences are required to demonstrate a proven capacity to innovate and scientize long-neglected research topics, such as migration, gender, climate, racism and discrimination, or colonial history. Outsiders consider these subjects, sometimes rightly so, intrinsically and exclusively politicized. The extreme politicization and media coverage of issues related to higher education could ultimately jeopardize the excellence of liberal science, particularly in the social sciences. Besides, this situation directly affects the safety of teachers and researchers, and sometimes their students, while continuing to fuel extremisms of all kinds.

The systematic link between plurality of thought and disruptive scientific innovation has disappeared. Authoritarian and techno nationalist regimes argue that their success is precisely due to their political model and their relationship to science. We have lived under the illusion that academic freedom is an indispensable, invincible condition for scientific excellence since the end of World War II. The rise of American science in the 20th century, alongside the affirmation/export of its democratic model, as well as the so-called victory of the “West” over Sovietism after 1989 seemed to come as a proof. Francis Fukuyama's “*end of history*” concept also applied to the production of knowledge. However, the rise of scientific powers under authoritarian political regimes, such as China, which quickly became the second scientific power after the United States (third or fourth behind the European Union if we consider the 27 EU member states and behind the United Kingdom) is evidence to the contrary. Two main reasons clarify this phenomenon: firstly, science produced in these regimes disregards essential humanistic, ethical, and critical scientific principles that view science as a quest for independent knowledge, ideally in the service of human development. If anything, theirs is a project of scientific power at the service of political power, according to the principle of techno-nationalism. Secondly, authoritarian science in the service of power aims to destroy critical humanities and social sciences. It is exclusively mathematized, quantitative, and oriented towards new technologies designed to reinforce a state model of surveillance. Scientism and authoritarianism can indeed form a single project. Caught between the United States and China, scientific giants which are both partners and competitors, European research, including the French scientific ecosystem, must make the voice of the humanist and critical scientific tradition heard.

The usefulness of academic freedom goes far beyond the scope of teaching and research. Universities, as places of knowledge, must be strongholds of democratic preservation and actively contribute to public debate by feeding scientific knowledge. To this end, academic

freedom is an absolute necessity. We urgently need to remember, as Dean Georges Vedel pointed out, that “academic freedom is made up of freedoms,” including other freedoms we enjoy in a democratic society. It has become imperative to raise awareness among civil society and the political world about the issue of academic freedom to preserve and promote the excellence of our scientific heritage.

IV Strengthening academic freedom: a multidimensional strategy

The following recommendations are structured around four pillars and are addressed to four types of actors: the state, the scientific ecosystem, civil society, and the European framework. These recommendations are based on numerous interviews with individuals with various responsibilities, both within and beyond higher education and research, in France and internationally. They are also inspired by the most recent initiatives we have observed.

The pillars of this strategy are the following:

1. Reiterate academic freedom as a fundamental principle of law;
2. Undertake a restructuring of universities to strengthen their capacity to defend and embody this principle;
3. Promote the emergence of a shared and vibrant culture of academic freedom within society;
4. Embed this dynamic within the broader framework of European science diplomacy.

2 Restate academic freedom as a fundamental principle of law

This first major sub-section outlines a multidimensional legal strategy to strengthen academic freedom in the French context. It is organized around several complementary axes. The first axis addresses the recognition of academic freedom as a fundamental principle of law, through the examination of the various possible avenues for its constitutionalization. The second axis focuses on the fight against SLAPP suits as an essential legal lever for protecting academics against abusive attacks. The third area highlights the need to establish an autonomous system of source protection for researchers, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, drawing inspiration from the confidentiality of journalistic sources while considering the specificities of scientific research and the principle of “open science.” Finally, the fourth area proposes to strengthen this protection by drawing on the concept of “the nation's scientific and technological heritage” to ensure greater protection of research work, particularly in the humanities and social sciences.

We defend a functional notion of academic freedom, based on the required intellectual independence for all missions and applied to all higher education and research staff. In the absence of such a demanding concept, academic freedom can potentially be reduced to a mere formal declaration, devoid of any real significance. Furthermore, it is not only an individual guarantee, but an essential institutional condition for the excellence of French research and the vitality of our democracy.

1.1. The constitutionalization of academic freedom

Two complementary options are worth exploring: on the one hand, the explicit inclusion of academic freedom in the Constitution, which would give it supreme normative value; on the other hand, the adoption of a framework law on academic freedom, defining its guiding principles, concrete modalities and procedural guarantees. These two hypotheses are not mutually exclusive: they can overlap and reinforce each other, articulating constitutional recognition and legislative implementation.

As a reminder, the “constitutionality bloc” refers to the set of reference standards that the Constitutional Council uses to check the conformity of laws with the Constitution. It currently includes: the text of the 1958 Constitution, its Preamble, which refers to the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, the Preamble to the 1946 Constitution, the fundamental principles recognized by the laws of the Republic (PFRLR), as well as the 2004 Environmental Charter and other standards of constitutional value recognized by legal precedents. New principles may be incorporated into this evolving bloc, either formally (constitutional revision) or through legal precedents (interpretation by the Constitutional Council).

The Constitutional Council has recognized academic freedom as a principle of constitutional value. It has not yet been qualifying as a fundamental principle recognized by the laws of the Republic, since the required criteria to do so have not been fully established. Its explicit absence from the Constitution also makes it vulnerable to legislative or administrative changes, as well as to variations in legal precedents: academic freedom must be exercised subject to the principles of tolerance, objectivity, and secularism, as well as the dignity of others and public order.

Constitutionalization would anchor this principle at the top of the hierarchy of norms, matching the scientific and democratic issues it represents. Such an approach would also clarify a currently unstable positive law. Legal precedents oscillate between invoking principles of independence, freedom of expression, neutrality, and even loyalty to the institution, without real consistency. The constitutionalization of academic freedom would elevate it to a structuring principle of the rule of law and strengthen the resilience of our democracy in the face of populist, illiberal, or anti-science excesses. Explicit recognition would also remove any ambiguity as to the content, scope, and legal reach of academic freedom. Constitutional recognition would define the scope of academic freedom (teaching, research, public expression), identify its beneficiaries (tenured and contract faculty, doctoral and postdoctoral students, supervisory staff), and specify its constraints (public order, scientific ethics). It would also strengthen the constitutional court's ability to censor infringements of this freedom in laws, regulations, or public policies affecting higher education and research. It would also send a strong symbolic signal, establishing academic freedom as a pillar of the French tradition of free thought (if not republican values). Finally, this elevation would ripple effect at the European level, strengthening France's position in scientific debates.

Counterarguments to constitutionalization must however be considered. Enshrining a principle at the constitutional level certainly grants greater legal authority by turning it into an enforceable standard of reference, but it also means that it must be regulated and reconciled with other principles of equal constitutional value. Furthermore, no right being absolute, academic freedom, even recognized at the top of the hierarchy of norms, would necessarily be subject to weighing by the constitutional judge. Recognition would therefore strengthen protection, but also formalize the conditions for its exercise, within the framework of a jurisprudential balance to be constructed.

Several complementary avenues for this constitutionalization can be envisaged, each with different outlined strategies. The first aims to encourage the Constitutional Council to recognize its constitutional value through a jurisprudential change. The other consists of conducting a targeted campaign among public authorities to place academic freedom on the constitutional agenda in all its possible forms, including through the adoption of a dedicated charter and a direct constitutional revision. Evidently, a revision can only be envisaged in a political context respectful of the rule of law. Under a populist or authoritarian regime, enshrining academic freedom in the Constitution could have the opposite effect, reinforcing and legitimizing increased restrictions.

1.1.1. Through interpretation or jurisprudential extension of the 1946 Preamble

Article 13 of the 1946 Preamble states that “*the Nation guarantees equal access for children and adults to education, vocational training, and culture*”. This text establishes the right to education, but remains silent on academic freedom, freedom of teaching, and freedom of research. A reinterpretation by the Constitutional Council is possible: recognizing that effective access to knowledge presupposes the existence of free teaching and research and therefore respect for academic freedom. This reading would be consistent with contemporary developments in comparative and international law and would make it possible to enshrine academic freedom as an extension of educational or cultural rights.

The Constitutional Council could also, on an *a priori* review or a Priority Preliminary Review on Constitutionality (QPC), recognize academic freedom as a fundamental principle recognized by the laws of the Republic, like freedom of association (Decision No. 71-44 DC, July 16, 1971) or the independence of university professors, recognized in 1984¹²². This approach is flexible, progressive, and less exposed to political tensions. It would allow academic freedom to be integrated into the constitutional framework without formally amending the text of the Constitution.

The Constitutional Council has never ruled on a QPC dealing with academic freedom *per se*, so far, preventing the development of specific and in-depth jurisprudence on academic freedom as a protected constitutional principle. However, a few QPCs have raised peripheral issues, particularly around freedom of expression in the civil service, the status of teacher-researchers, and state control over university content. But these QPCs have not led to a landmark ruling on academic freedom as an autonomous constitutional freedom.

For a principle to be recognized as a fundamental principle under the laws of the French Republic, several cumulative conditions established by constitutional jurisprudence must be met:

- it must be part of republican legislation prior to 1946, i.e. set out in one or more laws adopted under a republican regime prior to the Constitution of October 27, 1946 (which excludes norms originating from monarchical, imperial, or Vichy regimes);
- be sufficiently general in nature, expressing a legal principle of universal, abstract and structuring scope, rather than a contingent or circumstantial rule;

¹²² See <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/decision/1984/83165DC.htm>

- have been applied without interruption, consistently and uncontested, in the republican tradition, which implies normative and institutional continuity of the principle in question;
- fall within a fundamental area: public rights and freedoms, the independence of the judiciary, or the essential organization of public authorities in the Republic;
- have been explicitly recognized by republican laws, i.e., be identifiable in the letter or spirit of several republican legislative texts, reflecting a stable and consistent recognition of the principle.

Older texts (the Ferry laws of 1881, the 1896 law on the constitution of universities, and the 1939 law creating the CNRS) certainly lay a groundwork for university autonomy, but academic freedom, as a unitary legal principle, is not clearly formulated in the texts of the Third Republic. This path therefore remains legally narrow, unless we proceed with an extensive interpretation of the principles implicitly contained in these texts, or shift jurisprudence to a renewed conception adapted to the contemporary challenges of republican universalism.

A litigation strategy could give rise to a founding QPC, provided that a case meets the right legal and factual conditions. It is possible to imagine a strategic QPC, raised either in the context of disciplinary or administrative sanctions against a teacher-researcher for comments made in the course of their research or teaching activities, or in the context of restrictions on access to scientific data for reasons of national security or industrial secrecy; or a legislative reform regulating or conditioning scientific activity (e.g., on public-private partnerships, research topics, or university governance).

Such a QPC could invoke:

- Article 11 of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which enshrines freedom of expression, a prerequisite for the effective exercise of many other freedoms,
- Article 13 of the 1946 Preamble (right to culture and education),
- the principle of independence.

However, once again, no litigation has yet allowed such a crystallization before the Constitutional Council.

1.1.2. Via a Charter of Academic Freedom

We propose the drafting of a Charter of Academic Freedom inspired by the 1988 *Magna Charta Universitatum*¹²³, to be incorporated into the constitutional framework, as was the Charter of the Environment of March 2005. The purpose of this text would be to clarify, consolidate, and promote the legal principles guaranteeing the independence of higher education and research staff in the exercise of their teaching, research, and finding dissemination.

On November 23, 2016 (CE, No. 395652, 4^e–5^e chambers combined), the Council of State ruled that the principle of university autonomy set out in Article L.711-1 of the Education Code, does not have constitutional value and cannot be used as a basis for a challenge under the

¹²³ *Opus.cit.*, 1988 then 2020: <https://www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta-universitatum/mcu2020>

Constitution. This decision restricts the scope for constitutional litigation to protect university autonomy and is a significant normative obstacle to the full justiciability of certain infringements on the independence of universities. It does not however exclude other means of jurisprudential or constitutional protection, the scope of which is discussed below. Given the limitations of the existing legal framework, the creation of a constitutional Charter of Academic Freedom could be efficient to recognize the structuring role of science, research, and teaching in a democratic society and help combat the deleterious effects of post-truth, disinformation, and the weakening of rational debate in the public sphere. It would clarify the doctrinal and jurisprudential debate that distinguishes between categories of ESR staff by establishing:

- A direct functional concept, in which all teaching and research activities inherently require the guarantee of freedom of expression and independence of staff, in the interest of public service. This approach encompasses all higher education and research (ESR) staff, tenured or not;

- An indirect constitutive concept, focused on tenured teacher-researchers (university professors and lecturers), whose independence is recognized as a fundamental principle by the laws of the Republic. Strong statutory guarantees reflect this principle, depending on the institution: university professors are appointed by Presidential decree, which underlines their high level of responsibility and, paradoxically their statutory independence, while lecturers are recruited through a competitive examination organized under the authority of the ministry, and appointed by ministerial order. In both cases, statutory independence is protected by measures such as functional protection, strict procedures governing dismissal or compulsory transfer, and the mandatory opinion of the National Council of Universities (CNU). This position is based on the doctrine of Georges Vedel, who emphasizes that higher education structurally requires freedom of expression and statutory independence for academics, essential conditions for scientific quality and integrity.

The Charter of Academic Freedom could be structured as follows:

- A preamble stating: the essential role of knowledge and scientific truth in democratic life; the contribution of academic freedom to the progress of societies; the commitment of the French Republic to guarantee, protect, and promote freedom to teach, research, publish, and debate in accordance with the principles of rigor, independence, and intellectual honesty.

- Possible articles (to be developed with a dedicated review committee): the right to academic freedom for all persons, regardless of their status, participating in higher education and research missions; institutional independence of public higher education and research institutions; protection against political, economic, or ideological interference; guarantee of freedom of expression, publication, and dissemination in the context of scientific activities; democratic participation of academic communities in academic governance; the State duty to support fundamental research and critical teaching.

1.1.3. Through constitutional revision and explicit inclusion in the text of the Constitution

A constitutional revision would be the most direct way, in accordance with the procedure set out in Article 89 of the Constitution. This would explicitly enshrine academic freedom, inspired from foreign models such as Article 5 of the German Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) or Article 33 of the Italian Constitution. The latter states that “*Art and science are free, as is their teaching*”.

Article 5, paragraph 3, of the German Basic Law states that “*Art and science, research and teaching are free. Freedom of teaching does not exempt from loyalty to the Constitution*”.

Several formulations are possible in the French context, such as:

“Academic freedom is guaranteed. It includes freedom of teaching and research, the independence of teacher-researchers in their intellectual activities, and the autonomy of higher education and research institutions. It is a fundamental principle of the Republic and a condition for the free and democratic exercise of knowledge”.

Such language would provide the courts with a clear basis for punishing violations of this freedom. However, constitutional revision is politically difficult to achieve, particularly on a subject perceived as technical, potentially controversial, and sometimes even entirely secondary. Some fear that too much protection could lead to excessive university autonomy or a loss of accountability among teacher-researchers. Others believe that the current positive law is sufficient and that constitutionalization would be redundant.

A recent parliamentary initiative is worth mentioning: Senator Louis Vogel, lawyer and former president of Paris II University, introduced a constitutional bill (No. 540) on April 16, 2025. It aims to insert the following provision after the fourteenth paragraph of Article 34 of the Constitution: “*Conditions under which academic freedom is exercised*”.

From a legal standpoint, this choice is fully justified: Article 34 of the Constitution defines the scope of the law, particularly regarding the determination of rules relating to fundamental rights and freedoms. The proposal does not indeed explicitly define the normative content of academic freedom, referring to the law or to the subsequent interpretation of the Council to clarify its contours. However, by clearly enshrining this freedom in the Constitution, the legislator would be given exclusive competence to determine the concrete modalities of its exercise. This elevation would grant a status equivalent to that of the major public freedoms, while clarifying the delegation of power from the constituent to the legislature¹²⁴.

This approach would offer strong symbolic recognition and a substantial legal advance, but its effectiveness would heavily depend on the implementing legislation and the political will to make it a justiciable principle with effective guarantees.

1.1.4. By gradual reference to France's international commitments

By law, the Constitutional Council refuses to review the conformity of laws with France's international commitments, in accordance with its established jurisprudence on voluntary termination of pregnancy (Decision No. 74-54 DC of January 15, 1975). The Council considers that compliance with international commitments falls under ordinary courts, responsible for reviewing compliance with conventions. It asserts that the Constitution takes precedence over treaties in the event of a conflict, which limits its own review of the conformity of laws with international commitments. This interpretation limits the Constitutional Council's ability to base its decisions on international instruments for the protection of fundamental rights, such as those guaranteeing academic freedom. Ideally, a change in this doctrine would enable the

¹²⁴ The bipartisan support for this proposal, backed by Pierre Ouzoulias, Laure Darcos, and Jean Hingray, demonstrates a shared political will.

Constitutional Council to strengthen the protection of academic freedom by relying on the international instruments to which France is a committed party.

The European Convention on Human Rights and the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) recognize the freedom of expression of teachers and researchers as a specific component of academic freedom. Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights protects freedom of expression, obviously granted to the academic community. The European Court of Human Rights has clarified that freedom of expression for academics benefits from a broad protection against accusations of defamation and extends to the right to disseminate knowledge and spread the truth without restriction. Furthermore, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, referring to the *Magna Charta Universitatum*, reaffirms academic freedom by guaranteeing freedom of expression, action, research, and dissemination of knowledge without restriction (Recommendation No. 1762 [2006]). Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union expressly affirms academic freedom: “*The arts and scientific research shall be free. Academic freedom shall be respected*”. UNESCO and the UN have also made specific recommendations on academic freedom, notably in the Lima Declaration (1988) and the General Comments of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (No. 13, 1999).

The challenge is to formulate academic freedom as a fundamental freedom, by enshrining it within the framework of fundamental principles of law. This approach is consistent with the European Parliament's Recommendation of November 29, 2018, on the defense of academic freedom in the EU's external action. However, as this recommendation points out, “*violations of academic freedom are rarely examined in the context of human rights, because, on the one hand, human rights defenders still have little understanding of the specificities of academic freedom and, on the other hand, accusations often refer to the violation of other fundamental rights [...]*”. As a result, “*applicable standards remain underdeveloped, and violations of academic freedom are not sufficiently reported*”. This close link between academic freedom and fundamental rights should ultimately be clearly established to strengthen the legal guarantees for its protection.

1.2 Combating SLAPP suits: a major legal lever for protecting academics

We propose to initially adopt (and in some cases go beyond) the jurisprudence established in the Laurent Neyret case (2014-2017) concerning SLAPP suits against academics, the recommendations of the 2017 Denis Mazeaud report, and consider the 2025 opinion of the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH) on SLAPP suits. Finally, we propose to establish a link between the protection of whistleblowers and the protection of academics.

In June 2014, law professor Laurent Neyret, published an article in *Environnement et Développement durable* (Environment and Sustainable Development). He had reported on a Paris Court comment on the conviction of the Chimirec company for “*trafficking in hazardous waste*”. In response, Chimirec brought a defamation suit against him by way of a direct summons. This led to an investigation and a grueling three year long legal process. In several testimonies, Laurent Neyret emphasized the consequences this case had on him: although he had won his case, he had lost valuable time and energy and suffered from the public stigma associated with being under investigation., The Paris Court of Appeal upheld his acquittal on September 28, 2017. It ruled that the proceedings brought by Chimirec constituted an infringement of the freedom of expression of this teacher-researcher. The decision is considered

a significant step forward in recognizing the legal threats to academic speech, particularly when it concerns sensitive subjects of public interest. In an opinion piece published by *Le Monde* in March 2018, Laurent Neyret described this type of lawsuit as a strategy of intimidation: “*Their goal is not to win anything, but to silence people*”. He refers to the many forms of indirect legal pressure exerted in the context of gagging lawsuits: letters from lawyers, phone calls, diplomatic threats, all aimed at creating self-censorship. The case led the Ministry of Higher Education to take concrete measures. The “Functional protection in the event of defamation proceedings” administrative decision of May 9, 2017, strengthens the functional protection of teachers and researchers prosecuted for defamation due to their work. It provides for the payment of legal costs, legal assistance and, where necessary, police protection¹²⁵. Laurent Neyret's experience as a lawyer and university professor has helped bring the risks posed by SLAPP suits to academic freedom to the forefront of the legal and institutional agenda. It contributed to raise a greater collective awareness on the need to guarantee researchers a protected space for expression, an essential condition for the free and rigorous exercise of their scientific mission.

The 2017 report drawn up by a commission chaired by professor of private law Denis Mazeaud at the request of Thierry Mandon, then Secretary of State for Higher Education and Research made a few proposals. On the basis of a dozen cases identified, it suggested to strengthen the automatic functional protection of academics against such proceedings, as well as to provide the justice system with increased means to punish these abuses more severely, which is not unrelated to the previous case.

On February 13, 2025, the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH) unanimously adopted the “Combating SLAPP suits” opinion on the transposition into French law of the European directive (2024/1069 of April 11, 2024). This European text aims to counter SLAPPs. Based on a human rights-based approach, the CNCDH's opinion advises establishing a broad and protective legal framework that includes cross-border proceedings covered by the European directive, but also domestic proceedings and those brought before criminal courts. The aim is to fully recognize the abusive and dissuasive nature of such proceedings, with their profoundly deleterious effect on freedom of expression, citizen participation, and democratic debate, including in the academic sphere. The CNCDH made fifteen recommendations. We will focus the most relevant to academic freedom: establishment of a robust and comprehensive regulatory framework with the adoption of a broad definition of SLAPP suits, including the intent to intimidate; inclusion of purely domestic cases and criminal proceedings, and the establishment of a mechanism to cover defense costs and possible damages; and finally, consolidation procedural protections for defendants. These concrete and systematic recommendations are particularly relevant to cases of violations of academic freedom. Following the CNCDH, we advocate for an integrated, preventive, and remedial mechanism that effectively protects teachers and researchers against the misuse of legal proceedings intended to silence dissenting or simply critical voices.

Inspired by these three references, a consolidated summary of our proposals follows, focused on five areas of action:

-Combating abusive prosecutions targeting academics;

¹²⁵ See https://www.snesup.fr/sites/default/files/article/documents/circ_17-05-09_protection_fonctionnelle_diffamation.pdf

- Strengthening procedural guarantees for the accused;
- Increasing penalties for false accusations and creating deterrent mechanisms;
- Strengthening institutional support for the defense of academics;
- Motivated use of the analogy with whistleblower legislation.

1.2.1. Combating abusive proceedings: towards a dissuasive civil fine

In its identification of efficient means of deterring attacks on freedom of expression, particularly on teachers and researchers, the Mazeaud report had recommended the addition of a second paragraph to Article 32-1 of the Code of Civil Procedure. The proposal provided:

"Anyone who takes legal action in a dilatory or abusive manner may be sentenced to a civil fine of up to €3,000, without prejudice to any damages that may be claimed. Anyone who, under the same conditions, takes legal action with the specific aim of hindering the defendant's freedom of expression may be sentenced to a civil fine of up to €15,000, without prejudice to any damages that may be claimed."

In May 2017, Article 32-1 of the Code of Civil Procedure was amended in a more general sense: *"Anyone who takes legal action in a dilatory or abusive manner may be sentenced to a civil fine of up to €10,000, without prejudice to any damages that may be claimed"*¹²⁶. The efficiency of this provision remains uncertain, as courts rarely characterize abuse of rights or procedural bad faith. Other questions linger. How does this provision relate to existing mechanisms, in particular Article 700 of the Code of Civil Procedure on the payment of non-recoverable costs? What is the burden of proof to demonstrate delaying or abusive behavior? Is the imposition of this fine based on an objective criterion or does it depend on the judge's sovereign discretion? Furthermore, the initial proposal to introduce a specific and enhanced penalty for abusive legal actions against freedom of expression (including academic freedom) was not retained, even though this measure has become necessary.

Another recommendation in the Mazeaud report relates to the creation of Article 9-2 of the Civil Code establishing a civil fine for obstruction of freedom of expression, which would thus benefit all citizens beyond cases of infringement of academic freedom alone. This proposal affirms that *"everyone has the right to freedom of expression"* and that any deliberate infringement of this freedom, when it aims to obstruct its exercise, may be punished by a proportionate non-insurable civil fine, paid to the public treasury. The procedure would be initiated by the victim or the public prosecutor, based on a motivated decision by the judge. This legally innovative idea calls for several comments:

- A text broad in scope could undermine its clarity and raise difficulties in its articulation with the repressive measures already provided for in the Criminal Code (defamation, moral harassment, slanderous denunciation);

¹²⁶ Amended by Decree No. 2017-892.

- Assessing the deliberate intention to harm freedom of expression is likely to give rise to considerable legal uncertainty, unless a set of indicators or objective criteria is specified by regulation or jurisprudence.
- The scope of application should also be clearly defined, by excluding common law disputes or professional disputes that do not constitute a clear violation of academic freedom.

1.2.2. *Strengthening procedural guarantees for academics subject to legal proceedings*

The Mazeaud report proposes a targeted reform of the Law of July 29, 1881, on freedom of the press, by adding a paragraph to Article 41: it would stipulate that legal proceedings for defamation or insult against an academic in connection with their teaching or research activities may only be brought at the request of the public prosecutor. This provision would introduce a new procedural filter, comparable to the protections offered to certain sensitive professions, and would help prevent intimidating litigation.

The main counterargument to this proposal is the risk of undermining the balance of the 1881 law: amending this fundamental text in an illiberal political context could weaken the essential guarantees it currently offers in terms of freedom of expression. A boomerang effect could be created: this loophole could be exploited to restrict other forms of critical expression. There is also a high risk of politicization: by making the initiation of proceedings subject to the initiative of the public prosecutor, the executive would be given a filtering power that could prove arbitrary or opportunistic.

In addition, the creation of Article 47-1 is proposed: it incorporates the same procedural requirement that proceedings be initiated only by the public prosecutor's office, while adding a provision calling for a review of the strict evidence regime (*exceptio veritatis*). The aim would be to adapt this evidence regime to the specificities of scientific discourse, which is often based on interpretative controversies, debated hypotheses, or provisional results. The Mazeaud report proposes the following formula: “*Prosecution of researchers and teacher-researchers for defamation or insult for statements or writings expressed or written in the course of their teaching or research activities may only be brought at the request of the public prosecutor.*”

Combining these two reforms would establish a judicial filter limiting direct actions: private criminal proceedings could only be brought with the prior approval or agreement of the public prosecutor. This procedural change would constitute a major legal turning point. It would strengthen the protection of academics against abusive prosecution and rebalance the power relationship between teachers-researchers and powerful complainants.

Limitations and open questions:

- Could the public prosecutor's office systematically refuse to prosecute without being required to justify its decision? Should a mechanism for monitoring or ensuring transparency in these decisions be put in place? How could this be reconciled with the principle of discretionary prosecution, which is the prerogative of the public prosecutor's office?
- The review of *exceptio veritatis* would require a nuanced and technically demanding rewriting of press law, to clearly distinguish between the expression of a scientific idea (protected) and a factual allegation (subject to strict proof). This highly sensitive issue could come into conflict with the ECHR jurisprudence.

1.2.3. Strengthening penalties for false accusations

The Mazeaud report proposed the introduction of Article 226-10-1 into the Penal Code to strengthen the protection of university professors against abusive proceedings. It suggested increasing the penalties for false accusations when these were directed at academics because of their teaching or research activities, thereby infringing on their academic freedom.

Article 226-10-1 has indeed been introduced into the Criminal Code by the law of April 9, 2024, to more efficiently combat legal proceedings used to obstruct freedom of expression, particularly on subjects of general interest. This is a significant step forward: it enshrines the concept of SLAPP in criminal law and makes it possible to punish those who take legal action with the primary aim of silencing critical or committed speech.

Important as it is, this new provision does not recognize the specific risks faced by academics in the exercise of their academic freedom. Contrary to the recommendations of the Mazeaud report, the adopted text makes no explicit mention of teacher-researchers or their role in the production and dissemination of knowledge. It misses an opportunity for strong symbolic and legal recognition: affirming that legal reprisals against academics because of their work constitute a serious violation of a fundamental principle of democratic life.

Furthermore, in practice, the increase in penalties does not automatically lead to an increase in prosecutions or convictions in the absence of a proactive criminal policy. The conviction rate for false accusations remains structurally low in France, due to the strict legal conditions for characterizing false intent and the actual nature of the damage.

1.2.4. Institutional support in the defense of academics

The recommendations of the Mazeaud report aimed to establish aggravating circumstances in cases of false accusations against a teacher-researcher for statements or writings made in the course of their work. The added Article 2-25 into the Code of Criminal Procedure would have stated: *“Public education and research institutions may exercise the rights granted to civil parties in cases of false accusations against one of their researchers or teachers-researchers on the basis of statements, writings, or acts made or carried out in the course of their teaching or research activities”*.

The objective of this provision remains valid and would allow higher education institutions and public research organizations to bring civil proceedings in criminal cases involving false accusations against one of their academics. Such a measure would offer enhanced institutional protection by recognizing the collective responsibility of institutions in defending academic freedom. It would alleviate the financial, psychological, and procedural burden currently weighing on academics who face this type of litigation on their own. To be effective, this legal support requires a clear and committed commitment from institutions, which may be hampered by institutional caution, internal conflicts, or, more prosaically, a lack of resources. The recognition of such a right does not in itself guarantee effective support unless it is accompanied by a clearly defined national policy of functional protection, proposed further on.

1.2.5. Potentially linking the protection of whistleblowers with that of academics

The Wasserman Law adopted March 21, 2022, transposed European Directive 2019/1937¹²⁷, and strengthened the whistleblower protection regime by prohibiting reprisals and providing for legal coverage of abusive litigation. By analogy, academics exercising their freedom of criticism in the public or scientific sphere could be considered whistleblowers since they help reveal malfunctions, conflicts of interest, or unthought-of policies. From a legal standpoint, the analogy remains imperfect, however. The status of whistleblower is strictly regulated (clear violation of a standard, good faith, hierarchy of reporting channels) and does not cover scientific controversies, criticism of public policy, or academic expression. Nevertheless, this comparison highlights a problematic asymmetry: while robust protection mechanisms have been put in place for journalists, elected officials, and whistleblowers, university professors and researchers remain without any specific protection, despite their leading role in the field of knowledge.

In summary, the main points are:

- Creation of a public prosecutor's filter for defamation lawsuits,
- Increased penalties for slanderous denunciations,
- Possibility for institutions to bring civil action,
- Innovation in the form of civil fines for violations of freedom of expression,
- Re-examination of the scientific evidence regime (*exceptio veritatis*),
- Analogy with the law protecting whistleblowers.

The normative recommendations developed above aim to frame the concept of academic freedom with a genuine legal arsenal capable of responding to these forms of judicial intimidation. Such a project would benefit from being integrated into a broader public support system, which we will return to in the following pages.

1.3 Towards an autonomous source protection system for researchers in the context of open science

Researchers have been producing massive volumes of data since the beginning of the digital revolution. However, access to these resources is often hampered by economic, technical, or legal obstacles. Open science is defined as the unhindered dissemination of scientific research results, methods, and products. Its aim is to remove economic, technical, and legal barriers that hinder access to these resources by guaranteeing free, cross-disciplinary, and secure access to the outputs of public research, while making methods and protocols visible. The origins of this movement are scientific, civic, and, in part, political.

The “Open Data Directive,” ([EU] 2019/1024, June 20, 2019), requires Member States to make publicly available, open by default, in machine-readable, accessible, and traceable formats (acronym FAIR), data financed by public funds, while guaranteeing the necessary legal protections. The cardinal principle of open science is “*to be as open as possible and as closed*

¹²⁷ See <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32019L1937>

as necessary”. In France, the Law for a Digital Republic (2016) and the second National Plan for Open Science (2021-2024) drive this dynamic.

Juliette Galonnier (researcher at CNRS/SciencesPo) notes that “*open science equation is also the second part of the equation: data as closed as necessary, which does not seem to me to be the subject of the same institutional investment*”¹²⁸. Admittedly, she points out, researchers can define the degree of confidentiality of their work, and research universities have ethics committees, sometimes supported by a data protection officer. But, says Galonnier, these mechanisms do not sufficiently consider the risk for an academic of being forced to hand over data against their will by the public authorities in the name of, for instance, reasons of state or private interests, at the risk of exposing the respondents, putting themselves in danger, or compromising their work. Indeed, certain sensitive investigations require strict protection of sources, an ethical obligation that French law does not fully guarantee. In France, unlike other European countries or the United States, researchers are not granted any general privilege of confidentiality. As a result, researchers who refuse to disclose their sources or open their archives may be subject to searches, disciplinary sanctions, or even prosecution. Hence the need to establish an autonomous regime, inspired by, but distinct from the confidentiality of journalistic sources.

The regime applicable to the protection of journalists' sources in France is the result of several texts: Article 11 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, the Law of July 29, 1881, on freedom of the press, Law No. 2010-1 of January 4, 2010, on the protection of the confidentiality of journalists' sources, and Articles 56-2, 60-1, 100-5 and 326 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. As a reminder, Law No. 2010-1 strengthened the protection of the confidentiality of sources by prohibiting any direct or indirect coercion of journalists and by strictly regulating searches or seizures in newsrooms, which remain subject to judicial authorization and compliance with the principle of proportionality, “for the legitimate purpose pursued.” The protection also extends to journalists' collaborators to avoid any indirect pressure. Any breach of source confidentiality can only be justified by an overriding public interest, a concept which, nevertheless, remains criticized for its plasticity and the room for interpretation it leaves to the authorities¹²⁹.

1.3.1 A persistent legal loophole despite the ethical requirements of research

Much research (health, environment, history, sociology) relies on the collection of sensitive data, which in turn requires strict anonymity and primary sources protection. This requirement is ethical: researchers undertake to protect their interlocutors to guarantee their safety, privacy, and the trust necessary to conduct the investigation. However, the law is not indifferent to this requirement: French law requires compliance with scientific integrity and the ethical principles specific to each discipline. Since the law of December 24, 2020, the Research Code has stipulated that institutions must “*ensure compliance with the rules of scientific integrity*” defined in Article L. 211-2. It includes integrity, methodological rigor, and responsibility towards the persons investigated (see also the National Charter of Ethics for Research Professions, 2015).

¹²⁸ Galonnier, J. (2021). Thinking about the protection of researchers, their respondents, and their data in the age of open science. *La vie de la recherche scientifique*, (426, July-August-September), 10-12. <https://hal.science/hal-03419665>

¹²⁹ Agnès Granchet (February 13, 2020). *Source confidentiality in criminal justice*. La Revue des Médias. <https://larevuedesmedias.ina.fr/le-secret-des-sources-face-la-justice-penale>

Despite this formal recognition of ethical obligations, there is no autonomous regime specifically governing the confidentiality of research data, unlike professional secrecy or the confidentiality of journalistic sources. As a result, researchers who refuse to disclose their sources or open their archives may be subject to disciplinary sanctions, searches, or even criminal prosecution.

Past emblematic cases have illustrated the complexity of certain situations¹³⁰. In 1992, sociologist Rik Scarce spent five months in prison for protecting the anonymity of radical environmentalists he had interviewed. In 1994, Richard Leo, a doctoral student in law, handed over his notes to the police, breaking his promise of confidentiality and ruining the possibility of similar investigations in the future. In the Dominici case (2011), two sociology researchers, including then doctoral student at the University of Bordeaux Thierry Dominici, were summoned by the Toulouse Commercial Court to testify and provide recordings made under a promise of anonymity as part of their research on nationalism and activism in Corsica. Pleading their ethical and professional obligations, the researchers refused to hand over the requested data, facing the threat of legal sanctions. In Canada, the Marie-Ève Maillé case highlighted the tensions between judicial requirements and ethical commitments in research. In 2015, as part of a class action lawsuit brought by citizens against the company Éoliennes de L'Érable, the researcher was summoned before the Superior Court of Quebec to disclose the raw data from a qualitative survey she had conducted between 2010 and 2012 as part of her doctoral thesis at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)¹³¹. Her fieldwork focused on the social dynamics surrounding a controversial wind farm project and was based on 93 interviews under a signed confidential agreement. Refusing to compromise the confidentiality promised to the people she had interviewed, Marie-Ève Maillé opposed the disclosure order. Following a major debate in May 2017, the Court finally recognized the validity of her position and overturned the order, thereby enshrining the principle of research data confidentiality as an essential condition for scientific integrity. A final example: in 2017, Shamus Khan, a sociologist at Columbia University, refused to comply with a subpoena demanding the surrender of his ethnographic archives, at considerable legal expense and without institutional support. In an article recounting his experience, the author proposed several solutions for dealing with this type of situation: using a National Institutes of Health (NIH) confidentiality certificate for research involving health-related issues; requiring institutions (ethics committees, review boards) that impose confidentiality to actively defend it through legal counsel; and finally, setting up a fund or insurance pool to enable researchers to benefit from legal defense in the event of a subpoena, thereby protecting the practice and integrity of ethnographic research¹³².

In France, administrative jurisprudence has sometimes recognized the sensitivity of certain materials without making it a general principle. A 2019 ruling by the Paris Administrative Court of Appeal, the refusal of access to archives of sociological interviews by a third party was upheld on the grounds that they “*contained references likely to infringe on the privacy of the persons concerned*”¹³³. However, this solution is circumstantial and cannot form the basis for a general protection regime. In the absence of a protective legal framework, researchers must rely on academic practices, ethical charters established individually by universities, or the goodwill of judges. However, this legal uncertainty can have a deterrent effect in certain

¹³⁰ *Social sciences under surveillance. Account of a sociological investigation interrupted by an investigating judge*, 2016, AFS website, <https://afs.hypotheses.org/108>

¹³¹ See <https://bulletin-archives.caut.ca/fr/bulletin/articles/2017/01/actualit%C3%A9s-confidentialit%C3%A9-de-la-recherche-compromise-%C3%A0-l-uqam>

¹³² Shamus Khan, *The Subpoena of Ethnographic Data*, December 2018, Sociological Forum 34(19).

¹³³ CAA Paris, March 12, 2019, No. 17PA01394.

sensitive areas, particularly in the fields of political and social movements, health, precariousness, the environment, and armed conflict, where the protection of individuals is a prerequisite for research.

The lack of a protective legal framework exposes researchers to legal and institutional risks. Margot Verdier, researcher and expert in source law and data protection in the social sciences, points out that this legal vulnerability highlights a constant tension between the ethical requirements of research and the pressures exerted by criminal or civil law¹³⁴. She has been campaigning for years for the establishment of specific legal protection that considers the empirical and methodological realities specific to the humanities and social sciences.

1.3.2 *European framework progress*

The European framework remains a pioneer in the field of open data and scientific publications, seeking to reconcile openness, protection, and digital sovereignty. European law has ruled primarily on the confidentiality of journalistic sources, establishing extensive jurisprudence since the 1996 *Goodwin v. United Kingdom* ruling. The European Court of Human Rights asserted that the protection of sources is an essential condition of press freedom that can only be lifted in cases of compelling necessity, following a strict proportionality test. This position has been reaffirmed on numerous occasions (*Roemen and Schmit v. Luxembourg*, ECHR, February 25, 2003). However, the Court has not yet explicitly recognized an equivalent right for researchers.

However, the Strasbourg Court, *Gillberg v. Sweden* (2012) ruling set a first limit. In this case, a psychology professor had refused, on the grounds of confidentiality commitments made to his participants, to disclose research data following a Swedish law-based request on access to administrative documents. After being convicted in his own country, the professor appealed to the ECHR, invoking Article 8 (privacy) and Article 10 (freedom of expression). The Court, acknowledging the issues raised, rejected his appeal on the grounds that the data was not classified and that the university, as a public institution, remained free to allow access to it (ECHR, *Gillberg v. Sweden*, April 3, 2012, application no. 41723/06).

This often-criticized ruling does not exhaust the question of source protection in the humanities and social sciences. On the one hand, it related to an obligation of access, not a judicial or police request. On the other hand, it involved a civil servant teacher in a state with very expansive access legislation. The Court does not rule out the possibility of changing its jurisprudence in line with ethical guarantees, the sensitive nature of the data, or the status of the investigation.

Certain comparative legal systems appear to be more protective. In the United States, researchers may, in certain cases, benefit from a partial “privilege” recognized by the courts, particularly when they are treated as journalists, as defined within the First Amendment (*Branzburg v. Hayes*, 408 U.S. 665 (1972)). In *Cuomo v. Clearing House* (2009), the Supreme Court referred to the sensitive nature of certain data from empirical research, without going so far as to establish a general privilege. Better yet, Canadian courts have recognized, in certain cases, a principle of academic confidentiality. In *R. v. Vice Media Canada Inc.* (2017 ONCA 231), the Ontario Superior Court of Justice applied a test inspired by the *Wigmore* decision to determine whether a researcher could refuse to disclose his sources, based on criteria such as

¹³⁴ Margot Verdier, Marie-Ève Maillé, Thierry Dominici, interview, “Protecting research data” *Délibérée*, no. 19, 2023/2.

promised anonymity, the public interest in the research, and the absence of a less intrusive solution.

Collective research regarding personal data led to the proposal¹³⁵ of a GDPR-compliant classification model designed to guide researchers in the storage and access of data while preserving privacy. A result of a collaboration between the university library and the data protection service, it has produced a decision tree and a set of requirements for data warehouses, in accordance with the “FAIR” principles¹³⁶ and responsible open science practices. Sganga, Margoni, Senftleben, and Szkalej advocate, in recent publications, for the adoption of a European Research Freedom Act and a harmonized secondary publication right (SPR) to overcome legislative fragmentation and establish a level playing field for all scientific authors within the European Research Area¹³⁷. Lastly, the announcement in March 2025 of the upcoming creation of the European Health Data Space Regulation (EHDS) is a major step forward for the health sector. It establishes a common framework for secure access and reuse of health data for care, innovation, regulation, and research purposes, and strengthens interoperability and trust in its cross-border use. Although these initiatives relate to different contexts, they pursue a common goal: to build a European knowledge space that is open, ethical, and secure while involving a legally recognized right to source confidentiality for researchers.

1.3.3 A proposal for a protective regime enshrined in the Research Code: a model inspired by, but distinct from, the confidentiality of journalistic sources¹³⁸

Many academics are now calling for legal recognition of the right to confidentiality of sources in research, based on the principles of scientific integrity, academic freedom, and the public interest in research. As Lowman and Palys, specialists in these issues in Canada, note, “*without a credible promise of anonymity, certain areas of research would become inaccessible*”¹³⁹. In France, administrative jurisprudence remains hesitant, and constitutional jurisprudence has not yet ruled on this point. However, academic freedom could form the basis for a derivative right to source protection as does freedom of the press. Indeed, if we accept that research is based on freedom of investigation, dissemination, and criticism, then the protection of the conditions of investigation, including confidentiality, is a necessary guarantee.

Several actors have begun to address the issue. In 2021, the CNRS Ethics Committee restated that “*data confidentiality, particularly in sensitive research, is a major ethical requirement*” (COMETS, Opinion No. 43, CNRS, 2021). Professional associations such as the AFS and the ANCMSP have called for legislative reform to guarantee a protective framework. A bill to this effect was even tabled by MP Adel Ziane in April 2025, to amend the Research Code to include

¹³⁵ Mata i Noguera, E., Ortiz Uroz, R., & Labastida i Juan, I. (2025). *Enabling the Reuse of Personal Data in Research: A Classification Model for Legal Compliance*. arXiv. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2505.15183>

¹³⁶ Acronym standing for Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable.

¹³⁷ Senftleben, M., Szkalej, K., Sganga, C., & Margoni, T. (2025, February 13). *Towards a European Research Freedom Act: A Reform Agenda for Research Exceptions in the EU Copyright Acquis* (SSRN working paper, 27 pp.). SSRN. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5130069>

¹³⁸ Agnès Granchet, “*Des pratiques journalistiques éclatées mais une éthique commune ?*” (Diverse journalistic practices but a common ethic?), in Alexis Lucie, Devillard Valérie, Granchet Agnès, Le Saulnier Guillaume (eds.), *Le manuel de Journalisme*, Paris, Ellipses, 2022, pp. 155-174. “*Les évolutions des instances de régulation de l’information*” (Developments in information regulatory bodies), Chapter 3 of Part III on “*L’éthique du journalisme en pratique*” (Journalism ethics in practice), in Alexis Lucie, Devillard Valérie, Granchet Agnès, Le Saulnier Guillaume (eds.), *Le manuel de Journalisme*, Paris, Ellipses, 2022, pp. 193-209.

¹³⁹ Lowman & Palys, “*Defending Research Confidentiality*” *Sociological Methodology*, 2007.

such a guarantee (Bill No. 4537, National Assembly, April 2025). It has not yet been debated, but it marks the first parliamentary acknowledgement of the issue.

At the national level, one possible solution would be to include a specific regime for the protection of sources in the Research Code, inspired by the journalistic model but adapted to the requirements of scientific research. Such a provision could state: *“Researchers in the humanities and social sciences cannot be compelled to reveal the identity of their sources or to disclose information that could lead to their identification, if they have undertaken in writing to guarantee their anonymity or confidentiality within the framework of a research protocol validated by a competent academic authority. This protection may only be waived in exceptional cases, justified by a serious threat to public order, public health, or national defense, and by a specially reasoned decision of a court”*.

This provision would establish a conditional confidentiality regime: written commitment, institutional validation, and strictly regulated exceptions. It would offer researchers a minimum of legal certainty without hindering compelling judicial requirements.

Legal recognition of the confidentiality of sources in the humanities and social sciences is a democratic, ethical, and scientific requirement. It would enable securing research that is often essential for understanding contemporary societies and respect the fundamental rights of the people being investigated. As much other systems, French law has the tools to build a balanced and protective regime to that effect.

Box 7: Ensuring source confidentiality: self-protection strategies for researchers

In so-called restricted or impeded fieldwork settings, source protection relies on rigorous methodological and technical vigilance. Here are some essential habits to adopt before, during, and after fieldwork:

- Never take sensitive documents into the field: avoid bringing notebooks or phones containing lists of interviews or preliminary information. Opt for blank, neutral media instead.
- Erase the memory of recording devices: do not keep old interviews on a dictaphone, phone, or any other device.
- Separate archives and fieldwork: do not conduct field research while carrying your own archives or unprotected previous data.
- Secure your digital devices: protect your computer with a complex password; protect interviews, databases, and confidential documents with encryption or store them on secured clouds.
- Never leave your data lying around: whether in paper or digital format, sensitive data must always be under physical or digital control.
- Maintain control over your data: ensure that you know where your information is stored and who always has access to it.

Source: Allès, Delphine & Perrodin, Louise (2024), Research, training, and expertise in “restricted” or “hindered” fields: practices, methods, and new resources, data Paper #1, INALCO, p. 31 et seq.

1.4. Building on the “Nation's Scientific and Technological Heritage” (PPST)

We propose to fully mobilize the Nation's Scientific and Technological Heritage mechanism for protection of the nation's scientific and technical potential to guarantee the security of research work, including in the humanities and social sciences. The PPST covers all tangible or intangible assets that contribute to fundamental or applied scientific activity, as well as to the country's technological development. It is an essential strategic leverage to ensure national sovereignty.

The most sensitive elements of this potential are of fundamental interest to the nation, within the realm of Article 410-1 of the Criminal Code. This classification justifies enhanced protection, especially since their capture or misappropriation may give rise to criminal liability under Article 413-7 of the same code, which punishes the disclosure or transfer to a foreign power of information likely to undermine these fundamental interests.

The legal framework of the PPST is based mainly on the protection of scientific and technical potential decree of November 2, 2011, on the Prime Minister's order of July 3, 2012, setting out the implementation procedures in so-called restrictive areas, and on the interministerial circular of November 7, 2012, specifying the applicable procedures. The system is designed to protect knowledge, technologies, and expertise that, if compromised, could harm France's economic, scientific, or technological interests; against the strengthening of the military capabilities of foreign actors or the threat of France's national defense capabilities; the promotion of weapons of mass destruction proliferation and their means of delivery, or the exploitation for terrorist purposes on French territory or abroad.

The scope of the PPST covers public and private institutions, including universities, laboratories, companies, and research centers operating on national territory. It is headed by the General Secretariat for Defense and National Security, its implementation is entrusted to six senior defense and security officials attached to the relevant ministries, such as those in charge of research, defense, the economy, health, and transport. These officials adapt the protective measures to the specific characteristics of their sector of intervention.

The system is based on voluntary consultation with the entities concerned. Any organization can request an assessment of the sensitivity of its work and receive support in developing a protection strategy proportionate to the risks identified. The tools available include the creation of restricted areas with physical and logical access controls approved by the relevant ministry, legal protection against malicious acts such as theft of sensitive data, industrial espionage, or computer intrusions, as well as administrative and technical support for securing IT, physical, and human infrastructure. The system also aims to strengthen trust between public institutions and industrial partners around a common security foundation. Two decrees in March 2022 further consolidated the system to speed up procedures for accessing restricted areas (ZRR), while maintaining a high level of vigilance.

Despite its robustness, the system has certain limitations. Its activation remains conditional on a high severity threshold, rendering it ineffective when faced with more diffuse but nonetheless strategic forms of interference or influence, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. In an increasingly tense geopolitical context, these fields are increasingly being exploited, calling for heightened vigilance. Furthermore, the mechanism is primarily focused on the protection of tangible heritage, making it difficult to consider the specific vulnerabilities associated with intangible heritage, such as digital data, research themes, informal knowledge, and international academic networks.

It would be appropriate to undertake a review of the system to broaden its scope, with the above in mind and in accordance with recommendation 11 of Senator André Gattolin report. This reform should enable an explicit integration of the protection of intangible heritage. It would recognize the specificities of the humanities and social sciences, particularly regarding sensitive data, international partnerships, and high-risk fields, and develop risk assessment criteria better adapted to the diversity of disciplines and contemporary research practices. This change would aim to ensure a better balance between national security and scientific freedom, in accordance with the ethical and professional principles that underpin academic research.

It seems appropriate to conclude the end of this first series of proposals with a presentation of the bill introduced on April 18, 2025, by Senator Adel Ziane¹⁴⁰. Bill no. 543 rect. (2024-2025) aims to strengthen academic freedom, research independence, and transparency of private funding in higher education and research and is entitled “*aimed at guaranteeing the academic freedom of researchers and teacher-researchers, the independence of research work, and the transparency of private funds allocated to higher education and research.*” The authors focus on four key points: a) legislative framework for academic freedom, b) transparency of private funding, c) guaranteed independence from contractual obligations, and d) sanctions in the event of concerted obstruction of academic freedom.

2. Reform universities to strengthen their ability to defend and embody the principle of academic freedom

The protection of academic freedom cannot rely solely on the initiative of often isolated researchers. It is up to the University, an institution and a place where knowledge is embodied, to defend them. The legal foundations already exist. We now need a cultural shift: turn from the *ad hoc* reaction logic to a strategy of structural prevention and systemic solidarity. This section delivers concrete recommendations for universities, research organizations, and representative bodies to better protect academic staff. We therefore propose that France Universités take the initiative to organize, as soon as possible, a national conference on academic freedom.

2.1. Towards enhanced and systematic functional protection

2.1.1. An insufficient instrument... better than nothing

The 2017 Denis Mazeaud report already highlighted the inadequacy of the legal protection afforded to teacher-researchers who are the subject of defamation or denigration proceedings

¹⁴⁰ With several co-signatories including Yan Chantrel, Marie-Pierre Monier, and David Ros.

related to their work¹⁴¹. The report condemns the ineffectiveness of the functional protection mechanism provided for in Articles L.134-1 *et seq.* of the General Civil Service Code (former Article 11 of the Law of July 13, 1983): “*Functional protection is not a sufficiently powerful or effective instrument to deter gagging proceedings. Its activation, which is random, often comes too late, at the end of legal proceedings that the agent has had to initiate*”¹⁴².

The report proposed to automatically trigger functional protection in proven cases of legal proceedings based on the exercise of academic freedom, with structural measures (charters, referents, training). No legislative or regulatory reform has followed. It is Time has come to learn from experience and combat the current institutional inertia.

2.1.2. The law in force: an existing but insufficient mechanism

Article L.134-1 of the General Civil Service Code provides that public officials are entitled to protection in the event of an attack on their moral or physical integrity, or when they are the subject of legal proceedings related to their duties. This protection may include coverage of legal, travel, or accommodation expenses. It is however subject to a formal request and may be refused in the event of personal misconduct.

The Observatory of Violations of Academic Freedom (OALA) has produced educational videos to explain the procedure. In practice, the cumbersome procedures, lack of information, and absence of automaticity in serious cases render the system ineffective.

To change the current system, we propose the following measures:

- Automatically grant functional protection in cases of violations of academic freedom: we propose to amend the law and enable an automatic functional protection trigger when an employee is accused of acts related to the exercise of their academic freedom (scientific publication, conference, public speech, etc.). Retrospective validation by an interdisciplinary committee including an “academic freedom” representative (see below) would ensure its relevance.

- Expand the grounds and beneficiaries

- Extend protection to doctoral students, temporary lecturers, postdoctoral researchers, and non-tenured staff;

- Provide immediate psychological and legal assistance in cases of targeted harassment;

- Offer digital support to help colleagues disengage from social media or cope with violent media campaigns.

- Create a fund dedicated to the legal protection of academics. Given the asymmetry of resources between researchers under investigation and their adversaries (well-funded organizations, law firms, media operations), a dedicated fund would restore a minimum balance

¹⁴¹ In the context of requests for functional protection several institutions have requested clarifications from the ministry regarding paragraph 3, Article 11 of Law No. 83 -634 July 13, 1983 (“On the rights and obligations of civil servants”). The paragraph became article I in Law No. 2016-483 April 20, 2016 (“On the ethics and rights and obligations of civil servants”).

¹⁴² p. 19.

to cover legal costs related to the exercise of academic functions: defense against summons, summary proceedings, but also proactive actions (complaints for defamation, harassment, etc.).

Access to the fund would be via:

- voluntary referral with supporting documents;
- review by a pluralistic committee (lawyer, ethics officer, academic advisor, staff representative, member of the scientific council);
- full support in cases of emergency or obvious imbalance, or partial support based on a transparent scale;
- specific annual funding from each institution, backed by research grants or the operating budget;
- creation of a national academic solidarity fund, co-financed by the State, institutions, and partner foundations;
- direct participation by academics, for a symbolic sum and on a voluntary basis, could be considered.

We propose the implementation of a rapid assistance protocol within institutions. Each institution should adopt an emergency response protocol that includes:

- immediate coverage of legal costs;
- logistical/digital and media support, including isolating the person concerned from social media and appointing a temporary spokesperson for the crisis;
- the establishment of a rapidly available listening unit.

A pool-fund managed by France Universités, financed according to a solidarity-based scale, could be considered. France Universités would be the coordinate, monitor and centralize data on violations of academic freedom. There are precedents and inspiring existing models. We are thinking of Canada's CAUT Academic Freedom Fund: financed solely by donations, this emergency fund has made it possible to intervene in emblematic cases. In the United States, the Academic Freedom Alliance, created in 2021, is a private organization that provides direct legal support to professors who have been sanctioned for their statements or publications. In addition, international programs such as the Scholar Rescue Fund / Scholars at Risk / CARA / Philipp Schwartz Initiative, supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, offer support, relocation, legal assistance, or research grants to academics who are threatened in their own countries. The French program PAUSE (Collège de France) offers emergency relief to researchers in exile but does not cover violations of academic freedom on national territory. The proposal is therefore to create a similar structure specifically dedicated to cases occurring in France: a PAUSE program for French academics, in a way, but without the exile dimension.

Box 8: Functional protection in higher education and research (ESR), a mechanism that remains underused

Source: AEF, July 11, 2025¹⁴³.

While the risks facing ESR staff diversify, functional protection remains underused. Raising awareness of this right, simplifying access to it, and adapting responses to the specificities of academia are major challenges for effective and credible protection of ESR staff. Data on functional protection in higher education and research are taken from the annual survey conducted by the legal affairs departments of the ministries responsible for Education, Higher education, Research, Youth, Sports and Community life.

The survey covers two specific areas:

- The 172 public higher educational institutions under the MESR;
- The 12 main research organizations under the supervision of the same ministry (ANR, BRGM, CEA, Cirad, CNES, CNRS, Ifremer, Ined, Inrae, Inria, Inserm).

The data was collected from regional and vice-regional education authorities, the central administration, and the institutions themselves. It was processed based on voluntary declarations from the organizations surveyed. The DAJ itself highlights the limitations of this declarative methodology, which can undermine the reliability of comparisons over time. However, the response rate remains high and relatively stable: around 85% for higher educational institutions (83% in 2024) and increasing for research organizations (from 75% in 2022 to 83% in 2024).

Findings:

a-Still marginal use in ESR.

Despite an overall increase in requests for functional protection in the civil service, the higher education and research sector (ESR) remains relatively uninvolved: 3.5% and 6.5% of total requests received between 2021 and 2024. In 2024, only 321 employees of public higher education institutions and 70 employees of research organizations requested this protection, mainly for moral damage.

b-The number of beneficiaries remains low.

Teachers and researchers are the main applicants, but account for only 3.1% of total applications. Researchers from organizations account for only 0.9%. Administrative and management staff very rarely make use of it. Primary and secondary school staff account for more than 70% of applications.

c-Incidents mainly related to moral integrity.

The main causes are verbal abuse: insults, threats, defamation (75%), far ahead of physical assault (8%) or harassment (10%). In 2024, a few cases involved damage to property (vehicles).

¹⁴³ “Functional protection: few requests in ESR. Update on beneficiaries, causes, and measures,” AEF, Gwénaëlle Conraux, July 11, 2025.

The perpetrators are mostly other staff members, with students accounting for 10 to 22% of cases depending on the year.

d-Two-thirds of requests were accepted.

Most requests receive a favorable response (69% in institutions, 54.8% in organizations), often in the form of legal assistance. Refusals are mainly due to unproven facts or a lack of connection with the service.

e-Diversified but limited support measures.

In addition to legal assistance, responses include interviews, material protection measures (e.g., change of contact details), and sometimes HR measures (4 to 6% of cases in 2024). Sanctions against perpetrators (staff or students) remain rare.

f-Funding is on the rise, except in research.

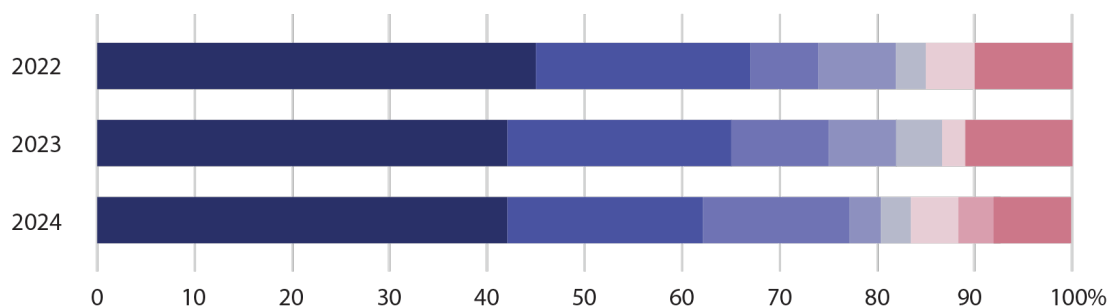
In 2024, the government disbursed over €1.4 million for functional protection. Funding allocated to higher educational institutions increased by 49%, but funding distributed to research organizations fell by 64%.

g-SLAPP suits

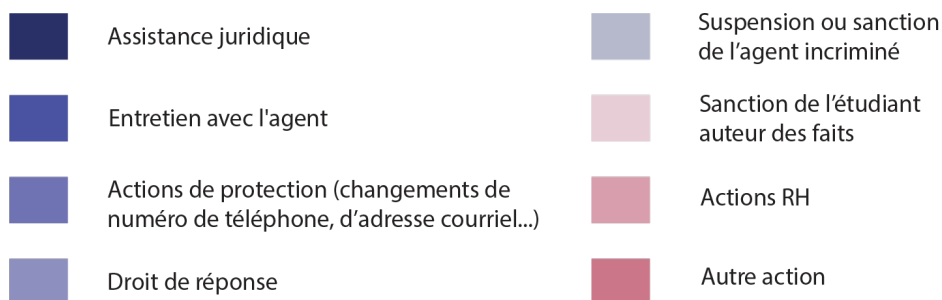
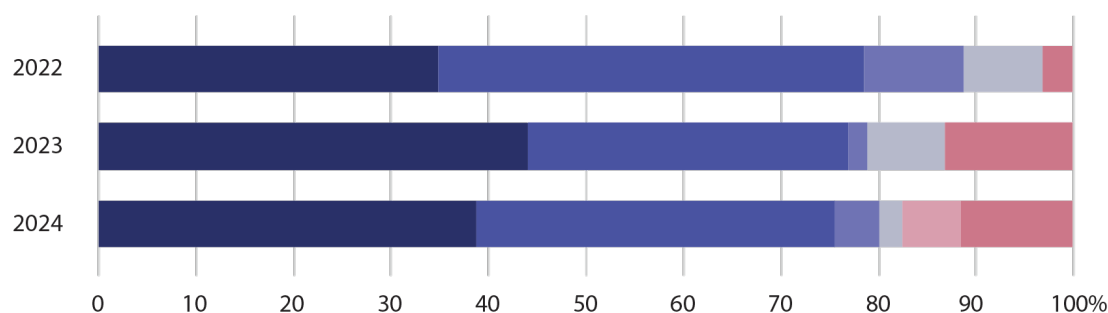
- 5 cases recorded in 2024 (compared to 8 in 2023 and 10 in 2022).
 - All 5 cases targeted ESR teacher-researchers (including 1 contract employee).
 - None in research organizations.
 - Complaints for defamation are a minority: 20% (compared to 71% in 2023).
 - 100% of requests received functional protection in 2024
-

Graph 3: Breakdown of measures to protect university faculty (2022–2024)

Établissements publics d'enseignement supérieur



Organismes de recherche



Source : Direction des affaires juridiques du Ministère de l'Éducation, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche pour AEF info, juillet 2015.

Public higher education institutions

Research institutions

Legal assistance	Suspension/sanctions against an agent
Interviews with agent	Sanctions against a student found guilty
Protective measures (phone number/email changes...)	HR Actions taken
Right of reply	Other actions taken

Source: Legal Affairs Department of the Ministry of Education, Higher Education, and Research for AEF info, July 2015

Dorian RYSER, CERI, Science Po/CNRS, June 2025

2.1.3. Acting in coordination: France Universités, CNRS, and SHS alliances

To avoid fragmented responses, coordinated action at the national level is paramount. We recommend to:

- create committees for academic freedom within France Universités, CNRS, and SHS alliances, responsible for monitoring violations, centralizing alerts, and developing coordinated responses;
- harmonize internal mechanisms by producing common practical guides (legal, psychological, media);
- organize regular mandatory training for HR departments, presidential teams, and ethics officers.

In addition, several complementary measures are worth considering, to consolidate a robust, integrated protection framework that is adapted to the diversity of contemporary threats facing academics.

To be implemented, such measures would require the following reforms:

- Appointment of “academic freedom” representatives: drawing inspiration from the Mazeaud report but rarely implemented, this measure would consist in appointing, in each university or French Ivy League (*grande école*) an “academic freedom” representative with functional independence. A trusted point of contact for colleagues in difficulty, they would serve as an intermediary between the institution and the assistance fund, and a liaison with France Universités and mediation bodies. Their position could be modeled on existing ethics officers in the civil service or ethics correspondents in certain research organizations.

Their role would be:

- to act as a trusted point of contact for faculty members facing pressure or attacks on their academic freedom;
- to serve as an interface with internal (presidency, legal services, communication, training) and external bodies (France Universités, mediators, assistance funds);
- to monitor and prevent, and be responsible for disseminating good practices, contribute to staff training, and monitor risk situations.

He/she would report to ethics committees, scientific integrity officers, or academic councils, depending on local configurations, while being part of a national support and monitoring network, similar to the system set up in Sweden by the *Sveriges universitets-och högskoleförbund* (SUHF). This network would ensure national coordination, share feedback, and strengthen collective action in favor of academic freedom across the country.

- Creation of an anonymized national register of violations: France Universités, or a partner organization, could be mandated to maintain an annual register listing reported violations of academic freedom (harassment, disciplinary sanctions, external pressure,

censorship, digital threats, etc.), their typology, the type of response provided, and the follow-up carried out. Such a tool would make it possible to better objectify the phenomena and base public policies on solid empirical data, following the example of the “Scholars at Risk Free to Think Report.”

- Adoption of a confidentiality charter for sensitive research: in line with discussions on data protection, the MESR or France Universités could propose a model charter to help committing institutions protect sources and data confidentiality in sensitive research, in accordance with ethical principles and the requirements of the GDPR. This charter should be the subject of specific training for legal departments and ethics committees.
- Outsourced or pooled legal assistance: a framework agreement at the national level could be reached with several law firms specialized in public, criminal, or digital law, or a network of partner lawyers trained in the specific issues of academic freedom could be created. This system would allow for rapid and appropriate support, and minimize unnecessarily complicated access to the fund.
- Establishment of an external and secure reporting mechanism: some cases involve internal conflicts or a lack of institutional response. Like ethical alert systems, an external and independent Ethics Council for University Activities reporting mechanism could be set up, for example via a joint France Universités/Ombudsman platform. The aim would be to offer colleagues a confidential and legally secure channel for raising concerns without fear of retaliation.
- Platform for academic solidarity among peers: to complement legal tools, an academic support platform could enable colleagues to show their solidarity in a structured way: collective drafting of *amicus curiae* briefs, opinion pieces, open letters, or mobilization in the event of legal proceedings. This type of intellectual solidarity, which is already practiced, would benefit from being institutionalized.
- Creation of a European (and international) label for universities committed to academic freedom: France could spearhead an ambitious initiative to create, at the national and then European level, a label awarded to higher education institutions that are concretely committed to protecting academic freedom. This label would distinguish universities that meet objective and demanding criteria: democratic governance, transparency on violations of academic freedom, legal support mechanisms, support funds, specific training, and the presence of independent committees. Carried out in conjunction with the European University Association (EUA), this initiative would complement ongoing proposals to create an academic freedom index, which could be integrated into international university rankings. This strategic leverage would enable academic freedom to become a criterion of excellence, on par with scientific quality or professional integration, rather than an adjustment variable in contexts of political or budgetary tension.

The proposals set out here are inspired by existing initiatives. Some are long-standing and often carried out with limited resources and institutional support but make a concrete contribution to advancing this vast undertaking. At the national level, we commend the remarkable work carried out by the “University Democracy” Mission at Nantes University¹⁴⁴, a valuable institutional singularity in the higher education landscape. Created in 2020 within the institution as an independent mission, its objective is to strengthen university democracy, experiment with new forms of participation and deliberation to increase the involvement of the community. It also aims to consolidate the mechanisms of representative democracy by reaffirming the role of elected representatives and promoting the exercise of full university citizenship and plays a

¹⁴⁴ See <https://www.univ-nantes.fr/universite/vision-strategie-et-grands-projets/democratie-universitaire>

role in scientific reflection on the forms and challenges of democracy within universities. The mission can be referred to by any elected body or designated authority within Nantes University. Led by professor of political science Arnauld Leclerc, it is an inspiring example of institutional innovation at the crossroads of democratic requirements, collective participation, and academic research.

- Systematic training for doctoral students and supervisors: the preventive dimension must be strengthened. All (post)doctoral students, young researchers, and supervisors should benefit from awareness-raising modules on academic freedom, related rights (anonymity, data protection, functional protection), but also new forms of repression (hate speech, cyberbullying, SLAPP suits, security restrictions). These training courses could be included in doctoral schools at the start of the academic year.
- Mobilizing academic mediators: a little-known but essential resource, the position of mediator for national education and higher education is independently reporting directly to the minister. It investigates deadlock situations, proposes amicable solutions, and reestablishes dialogue while respecting everyone's rights. Any user or staff member of higher education, including doctoral students, may refer to the Ombudsman if they consider that they have been treated unfairly or arbitrarily during their academic activities. The Ombudsman's services are free of charge, confidential, and non-contentious.

The mediator has also been recognized (decree No. 2022-1284, October 3, 2022) as the external authority responsible for receiving reports from whistleblowers in the fields of national education and higher education. Doctoral students or academics faced with abusive practices, breaches of scientific ethics, or institutional pressure may, under certain conditions, alert the mediator while benefiting from the protection offered to whistleblowers. Mediation is therefore a fully-fledged means of recourse, complementary to traditional legal or disciplinary channels, and deserves to be better known and used by the academic community, including on issues of academic freedom.

- Towards the widespread adoption of academic freedom charters in universities: the drafting and adoption, by collegial vote or otherwise, of academic freedom charters, based on clear ethical commitments, is a necessary step in affirming the role and responsibility of universities. These charters could be coordinated nationally by France Universités, while respecting the autonomy of individual institutions.

a) Adopting clear ethical rules on funding

The adoption of such charters cannot do without an in-depth ethical reflection on the methods of funding research, public and partnership based. It is essential to codify transparent, public, and enforceable standards specifying the origin of funding, the conditions for its allocation, and any expected *quid pro quo*. These standards must ensure that external funding, from economic or philanthropic sources, does not compromise the integrity of scientific work. Each university should have a committee responsible for ethics in funding to examine the origin, conditions, and implications of the public and private resources it receives. Attached to the scientific council and working closely with the ethics committee and the legal department, this committee would ensure that agreements and partnerships comply with the principles of academic freedom, research independence, and scientific integrity. To avoid a proliferation of bodies, this role could be entrusted to the existing ethics committee, if it is given an explicit mandate, its

resources are strengthened, and its ability to publish justified and accessible opinions is guaranteed.

This committee would be responsible for reviewing contracts and partnerships involving external funding, assessing the risks of conflicts of interest, and proposing guidelines compatible with academic requirements. In cases of doubt or controversy, it could refer the matter to a national expert group coordinated by France Universités to obtain an independent and collegial opinion.

More broadly, it should be strongly reaffirmed that subordinating scientific priorities to established interests (industrial, ideological, or partisan) is contrary to the fundamental requirements of the pursuit of excellence.

b) External “institutional restraint” vs. rich internal democracy

The drafting of public speaking charters, inspired by discussions in several institutions, could formalize a demanding and nuanced conception of the institutional role of universities in the public sphere. The principle of “institutional restraint,” now preferred to that of “institutional neutrality” today, implies that institutions refrain from commenting on subjects that do not directly relate to their scientific and educational mission. However, this reserve must not under any circumstances translate into systematic silence or the erasure of public debate “among researchers”. Institutional restraint is indeed an exercise in self-check, not censorship. It requires, in turn, a democratic internal governance respectful of the plurality of individual expression. As such, these charters must reflect a balance between institutional responsibility and image, individual academic positions, and freedom of expression.

INRAE in 2022 developed a Charter of Public Expression in the Service of Dialogue between Science and Society, accompanied by a set of very practical tools for its 12,000 employees. This could inspire universities, in that they would benefit from making an “institutional kit” on academic freedom and public speaking available to their staff and students. This kit could include:

- an explanatory sheet on functional protection in cases of harassment, threats, or abusive proceedings;
- a list of competent lawyers who can be called upon in sensitive situations;
- recommendations on public communication, including on social media;
- easy access to psychological support services for staff targeted by pressure or defamation campaigns.

France Universités could coordinate the development of these tools at the national level, in the form of regularly updated fact sheets, enriched with concrete cases and reference resources.

Box 9: A charter for public expression by researchers promoting dialogue between science and society: the INRAE Charter (2022)¹⁴⁵

Although INRAE is not an organization from the humanities and social sciences, it was the first in France to adopt a charter governing researchers' public expression in 2022.

The French National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food, and the Environment, is a public applied research organization created on January 1, 2020, from the merger of INRA (French National Institute for Agricultural Research) and IRSTEA (French National Research Institute for Science and Technology for the Environment and Agriculture). The Institute's mission is to produce, disseminate, and promote scientific knowledge to respond to major ecological, health, economic, and social challenges.

The 2022 charter is based on the observation that researchers are increasingly being asked to speak out in the public arena. However, these statements often clash with media logic, which is not always compatible with the long timeframes, complexity, and uncertainties inherent in the scientific process. There is therefore a real risk of misinterpretation or exploitation of results, both in the public arena and within the scientific community.

The charter aims to establish a framework that articulates several dimensions: freedom of expression for staff, compliance with ethical rules, openness to democratic debate, scientific rigor, and protection for staff in the performance of their duties.

Thus, while researchers enjoy specific legal protection in their public statements related to their work, their statements must comply with the principles of scientific integrity: transparency, clarification of uncertainties, recognition of the plurality of approaches, and clarification of the degree of validation of results.

When researchers speak to the media on subjects directly related to their duties, they may mention their affiliation with INRAE. However, they are advised to specify that their comments do not bind the institution: management only is authorized to speak on its behalf.

When speaking in a personal or civic capacity, employees remain free to express themselves. In this context, they must not mention their affiliation with INRAE or use the institution's resources (business address, social networks related to scientific activity).

The charter sets out specific recommendations for public statements:

- specify whether the statement is made in a professional or personal capacity;
- explain the position taken (validated result, hypothesis, opinion);
- declare any potential conflicts of interest (funding, commitments);
- describe the nature of the statement (information, expertise, advocacy);
- indicate the scientific status of the content presented (validated, consensus, controversial).

¹⁴⁵ See [https://www.inrae.fr/sites/default/files/pdf/Charte-ExpressionPublique_INRAE-\[Fr\].pdf](https://www.inrae.fr/sites/default/files/pdf/Charte-ExpressionPublique_INRAE-[Fr].pdf)

Once this framework has been established, INRAE commits to supporting its staff:

- through training, guides, and personalized advice;
- by clarifying relationships with media actors;
- by providing functional protection to staff exposed to attacks or threats related to their public statements.

2.2. Freedom and security in research: a priority under pressure

Ensuring the security of research activities is essential, particularly when they involve areas that are sensitive from a technological, economic, or strategic standpoint. In France, two procedures reflect this requirement: the appointment of Defense Security Officers (FSD) in higher education and research institutions, and the classification of certain laboratories as Restricted Access Zones (ZRR), subject to strict rules on access and collaboration.

However, their evolving regulatory framework, their sometimes opaque and uneven implementation, and their gradual extension to non-military fields are raising growing concerns about their effects on academic freedom, particularly where control mechanisms can conflict with the principles of openness, access to sensitive areas, and critical freedom in interdisciplinary projects and/or in the humanities and social sciences.

a. A fragmented and evolving regulatory framework

Decrees No. 2011-142 of February 1, 2011, and No. 2011-193 of February 21, 2011 established Security and Defense Officers. Placed under the authority of the Senior Defense and Security Officers (HFDS) of the ministries, they identify and manage security risks in institutions. In practice, this function is in practice often performed by the Directors-General of Services, raising questions about the possible confusion between administrative logic and scientific requirements.

ZRRs, for their part, are provided for by the same decree and by the order of July 3, 2012. They are rooted in criminal law: classified units are “protected areas” as defined in Articles R. 413-1 *et seq.* of the Criminal Code. Any outsider—including doctoral students, post-doctoral students, or foreign researchers—wishing to access them must undergo screening, i.e., prior authorization based on a risk assessment.

b. Worrying effects of implementation

The Scientific Council of the CNRS Institute of Engineering and Systems Sciences (INSIS) expressed its concern in a recommendation dated February 24, 2014. It denounced the administrative burden of the ZRR system, which hinders international scientific collaboration, a contradiction between the objective of protection and the CNRS's strategy of openness, and the indiscriminate application of the regime, dismissing the specificities of different disciplines. The Conference of Section Presidents of the National Committee hammered the point home in a motion dated February 27, 2015. It highlighted vague classification criteria based on questionable keywords, an attack on the fundamentally collaborative nature of research, and a systemic risk to national research if ZRRs were indiscriminately generalized.

c. The decision of the Council of State of March 11, 2025 (No. 495971)

Referred to by The Association of Laboratory Directors (ADL)¹⁴⁶ referred to the Council of State on the legality of the decree of May 14, 2024, that strengthens the rules for access to Restricted Areas (ZRR). Regarding the priority constitutionality review, it refused to refer it to the Constitutional Council, considering that the provisions in question are sufficiently regulated by law and do not, in themselves, constitute a clear violation of academic freedom or the principle of legality. The Council of State ruled on the merits that the conditions for authorizing access to ZRRs (procedures, deadlines, ministerial affiliation) are legally regulated and proportionate to the objective of national security. It considered that the administration's one month silence constituted an implicit refusal, in accordance with the principles of general administrative law. Finally, the Council emphasized that access decisions are based on security criteria and fall within the authority of the State, not on scientific or academic assessments: they are therefore not subject to review by university authorities.

In its decision No. 495971 March 11, 2025, the Council of State, seized by the Assembly of Laboratory Directors, confirmed the legality of the ZRR regime and rejected the priority constitutionality review challenging its conformity with the Constitution, considering the grievances raised to be insufficiently substantiated. Thus, the Council of State rejected the request on the grounds that neither the decree nor the legislation were deemed contrary to the Constitution. However, while this decision confirms the formal legality of the system, it does not settle the question of its practical effects on freedom of research, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. It does not recognize any direct infringement of academic freedom but does not rule out the possibility of indirect effects. This decision does not close the debate. Doctrinal analysis (notably developed by Philippe Raimbault¹⁴⁷) emphasizes that, on the contrary, it opens a space for critical reflection on the legal and academic issues raised by the measure. These issues include the impact of ZRRs on recruitment policies, the free movement of researchers, and the international attractiveness of French research.

The widespread use of the scheme is particularly worrying. In 2025, there will be 931 ZRRs, 201 of which were created in 2023. In some cases, French researchers themselves are paradoxically denied access. In Bordeaux, for instance, a postdoctoral researcher was denied access to a laboratory in a ZRR, illustrating the counterproductive effect of the system.

¹⁴⁶ See <https://adirlabos.wordpress.com/>

¹⁴⁷ See <https://www.aefinfo.fr/depeche/730722-le-conseil-d-etat-se-penche-sur-le-regime-juridique-des-zones-a-regime-restrictif-analyse-de-philippe-raimbault>

This situation is giving rise to growing protest within the academic community and trade unions, which denounce the opacity of the procedures, the lack of justification for refusals, and the disproportionate effects of the restrictions imposed on access to laboratories. While it is true that the Council of State, in its 2025 decision, did not recognize any proven infringement of academic freedom, jurisdiction points to serious risks of abuse, particularly in cases of opaque or indiscriminate application of the system. Finally, converging analyses by researchers (e.g., at the University of Bordeaux), professional associations, and trade unions emphasize that, as currently used, the ZRR regime can restrict research freedom, hinder scientific cooperation, and undermine the international dynamism of the ESRI.

d. Practical abuses observed

The Gattolin report already emphasized the need to strike a balance between security and scientific freedom. It warned against excessive or opaque implementation of security measures. Several abuses have since been documented by several colleagues, some of whom were interviewed for this report:

- the “normative cascade” whereby the balanced recommendations of the initial texts are distorted at each level of application (decrees/orders/circulars/local practices), resulting in a maximalist and restrictive interpretation of SDSs;

- Opacity in decision-making: in some cases, access to ZRRs has been denied without written justification, making any appeal impossible.

- Real lack of legal certainty: institutions and staff do not have clear mechanisms for challenging or understanding decisions. This particularly undermines young researchers and blocks entire areas of research, especially the most interdisciplinary ones.

- Real disciplinary rigidity, as social sciences and humanities units are sometimes subject to the same rules as strategic laboratories in physics or biotechnology, without specific risk assessments.

e. Considering these converging observations, we make the following recommendations:

- 1) FSDs should not be limited to an administrative safety function. They must be fully integrated into research missions and internal exchanges. Their training and anchoring in the academic fabric are essential. It is recommended that their missions be carried out on a full-time basis or, depending on the size of the institutions, at least on a part-time basis.

- 2) The traceability of authorizations and refusals must be implemented to objectify the functioning of the system and guarantee its fairness.

- 3) Classification decisions should be reviewed regularly, in consultation with unit directors, researchers, and HFDS.

- 4) Any refusal of access to a ZRR must be formally notified, with a right of appeal or mediation before an independent scientific committee, including, where applicable, the MESR Ethics Committee (in accordance with recommendations 6 to 8 of the Gattolin report).

5) Finally, security measures must consider the specific characteristics of the humanities, the diversity of fields, international partnerships, and editorial practices.

6) Making academic freedom a subject of strategic action/research: articulating action/research and structured measurement of academic freedom is a strategic lever for strengthening the resilience of the academic world in the face of contemporary threats. It is a prerequisite for placing academic freedom back at the heart of European research and education policies.

We propose the launch of a national action research program on academic freedom, inspired by initiatives such as the COLIBEX¹⁴⁸ international chair on freedom of expression, which includes a specific focus on academic freedom.

This program would pursue several objectives:

- Document and empirically analyze violations of academic freedom in Europe and beyond, combining legal, sociological, political, and ethical approaches;

- Experiment with research methodologies in inaccessible, prohibited, or dangerous contexts for researchers (see the pioneering work carried out at INALCO in high-risk areas);

- Propose concrete tools to strengthen academic resilience in the face of restrictions: remote research strategies, legal protections, alert mechanisms, international coalitions.

In this regard, the SCRIPTS / Science Friction: Patterns, Causes and Effects of Academic Freedom Contestations (2021–2025) project is an exemplary model. Coordinated in Berlin, this project combined scientific production, databases, formats for the public (podcasts, interviews, popularization), and participation in academic mobilization events (Berlin Science Week, Academic Freedom Week at Humboldt University). The work published in the special issue of *Global Constitutionalism* entitled “*Academic Freedom: Global Variations in Norm Conceptualization, Diffusion, and Contestation*” provides a valuable comparative framework.

This type of action research enables a direct link from academic knowledge to concrete proposals for strengthening academic freedom, based on evidence and a transnational approach.

7) Strengthening the measurement of academic freedom: index, observatories, and Europe's unique role in this matter.

For measurement and international comparability, we call to:

- Strengthen existing observatories, such as the OALA, by integrating European expertise and broadening their scope to include documentation of violations in EU member states.

- Support the development of European academic freedom indices, to complement or engage in critical dialogue with existing instruments (e.g., the V-Dem Academic Freedom Index), considering the legal, institutional, and cultural specificities of the European space.

- Work to integrate these indices into international university evaluation mechanisms: this requires advocacy work with major ranking agencies (QS, Times Higher Education, ARWU)

¹⁴⁸ See <https://libexpress.hypotheses.org/>

to ensure that academic freedom becomes a fully-fledged evaluation criterion alongside scientific excellence.

-Promote data on academic freedom in European programs: Horizon Europe (Regulation, Art. 72), Erasmus+ (Regulation, Art. 64), and other instruments should include effective respect for academic freedom as a condition for funding allocation.

-The work commissioned by the European Parliament (notably the Academic Freedom Monitor 2024 and Overview of *de jure* Academic Freedom Protection, EPRS, 2025 reports) offers an ambitious roadmap that should be taken up and operationalized.

Among the six policy options identified, we highlight:

-Clarification of the European standard of academic freedom (grounded in Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights) based on the common constitutional traditions of the Member States;

-Strengthening European legal frameworks on academic freedom, in line with the EU's competences in the areas of research, education, and the internal market;

-Improving data comparability and visibility by including students, young researchers in precarious situations, and the effects of self-censorship, which are currently poorly measured;

-Consolidating the “EP Academic Freedom Monitor” as a structuring monitoring tool at the European level;

-Enhanced integration of academic freedom into European education, research, and innovation policies;

-Developing a systematic data meta-analysis on academic freedom at the European level.

These areas require strong institutional support, close coordination between the national and European levels, and an explicit commitment from universities and research funding agencies.

Box 10: Research in a hostile world: ways to reinvent scientific practices.

This box summarizes the main findings of the survey conducted by Allès Delphine, Perrodin Louise, “*Research, training, and expertise in ‘prevented’ or ‘hindered’ fields, Practices, methods, and new resources*” data paper #1, Inalco, December 2024. The authors name two necessary evolutions to maintain the link with the field: the formalization of methods for collecting, analyzing, and ensuring the reliability of data obtained remotely in accordance with scientific and ethical standards, and the systematization of training in mixed methods, reflexive practices, and issues of security and scientific integrity in sensitive research contexts.

The survey highlights the urgent need for stronger institutional commitment to support researchers working in restricted fields through greater recognition of the specific constraints faced by such research, clarification of mission validation procedures, and funding for mechanisms adapted to the complexity of these fields. The report warns that this depends on

the institutions ability to preserve the diversity of research subjects and spaces in the social sciences and to ensure the training of a new generation of specialists in area studies.

In a world increasingly marked by the closure of research spaces and the politicization of knowledge, restricted fieldwork areas are a methodological challenge. But they also reveal the structural transformations of scientific work and the tensions between academic requirements, safety standards, institutional logic, and the empirical conditions of knowledge production.

1/ Faced with the accumulation of obstacles to access to the field, structured institutional support is essential. It is not a matter of replacing fieldwork with remote work, but rather of recognizing the irreplaceable nature of direct observation.

- Researchers are calling for increased support with visa applications, research permits, and local agreements to avoid risky workarounds and secure access to the field.

- Security and defense functions must be carried out through regular exchanges before and during fieldwork.

- Consolidation of the role of UMIFREs and certain embassies, which are seen as valuable sources of logistical, administrative, and financial support, as well as facilitating access to local partners.

2/ Educational support:

- Comparing methods between disciplines, co-writing, and remote workshops are ways to maintain research momentum despite obstacles.

- Better methodological anticipation when developing the subject.

- Combining fieldwork *in situ* with remote data collection, through renewed training in mixed methods. In this regard, work on digital methodologies on the one hand, and on the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods on the other, offers valuable insights into how research practices can be hybridized (films).

3/ A key challenge for researchers is to ensure that remote data collection is as rigorous and systematic as possible.

Improving the reliability of this data requires greater use of automation and information cross-referencing tools. This is particularly true of practices grouped under the vague methodologically unconsolidated OSINT (open-source intelligence) term.

Maintaining links with the field is crucial to ensuring data reliability and contextualization, particularly in the context of enhanced triangulation strategies. In this regard, training in specific tools (such as KoboToolbox) or participatory research approaches deserves to be developed.

In addition, collaborations with researchers or local actors can help ensure the collection, validation, analysis, or co-authoring of data. However, these partnerships must be designed with increased ethical vigilance so as not to expose local collaborators to risks.

Many researchers are calling for the systematic provision of open access data. However, given the associated costs (storage, translation, platform maintenance), such sharing requires institutional support. It also requires considering inequalities in access to databases dependent on geographical or linguistic contexts. Several researchers highlight the lack of databases in non-Latin languages or the low level of digitization of the press in certain countries, such as Russia. Support for digitization, development of tools capable of processing data in languages with limited resources, and expanded access to commercial resources (e.g., collective subscriptions such as those offered by BULAC or IFRAE) are identified as priorities.

These findings call for enhanced training in automated qualitative (e.g., NVivo) and quantitative analysis tools to respond to the growing abundance of textual and visual data, while ensuring critical reflection on the contributions and limitations of AI.

3. Raising awareness and celebrating a vibrant culture of academic freedom beyond the boundaries of the university

It would be deceptive to believe that all the answers to the threats to academic freedom lie solely in the legal sphere or in the enactment of new standards under the responsibility of research university presidents. Effective protection also requires mobilizing the intellectual, ethical, and professional resources of the academic world itself, in particular its capacity for self-reflection, mobilization, and defense. Ethical reflection, conceived as reflexive thinking, constitutes a fundamental basis from which to consider sustainable educational and preventive actions within the university, for its users and beyond.

We propose a set of complementary measures to the academic community, decision-makers, and civil society, all guided by the same ambition: to place academic freedom at the heart of the democratic contract. In line with the principle of participatory science, the aim is to actively involve citizens in its defense: not as spectators, but as actors capable of understanding the issues at stake and acting collectively. This mobilization requires embedding academic freedom firmly in the public consciousness by building a genuine shared culture of freedom that can be taught and passed on.

3.5 Cultivating a collective awareness of academic freedom

A democratic society cannot efficiently protect what it does not understand or is unaware of. It is urgent to render the concept of academic freedom accessible and familiar to the public, especially to younger generations. We recommend the launch of a major national awareness campaign on academic freedom at the start of the 2025-2026 academic year, focused on several areas:

3.6 A campaign across all communication channels

-Posters, video clips, podcasts: distributed on social media, in public transport, libraries, and all campuses in France, with clear messages illustrated by concrete and accessible situations.

-Partnerships with illustrators, comic book artists, comedians, and science YouTubers: to create a series of original drawings, comics, clips, or short formats explaining, in an entertaining but rigorous way, what academic freedom is, what it allows, and what is at stake.

-Unifying hashtag: for example, #LibertéAcadémiqueFrance or #AcademicFreedomEU to bring together testimonials, support, and actions.

3.3. Remodel “Science Festival” into a “Science and Academic Freedom Festival”

An opportunity for laboratories and universities to open their doors to the public to promote exchanges. This annual and national initiative takes the form of a day or a week in each institution, combining scientific rigor and conviviality.

Examples of activities:

-Citizen conferences, bringing together researchers, journalists, students, and community leaders.

-Public speaking and science communication competitions on a theme, for example: “Why is academic freedom everyone's business?”

-Art installations and interdisciplinary performances (theater, contemporary art) inspired by historical cases of censorship or intellectual resistance.

-Presentation of the France Universités Academic Freedom Award, recognizing a significant contribution (teacher-researcher, whistleblower, students, mediation work).

3.4. Actively involving students

Provide training on the subject and launch a call for student projects, financed by a dedicated national fund, to organize events, exhibitions, or digital projects related to academic freedom.

4. Investing at the European level through the tools of science diplomacy

In this report, measures aimed at strengthening the conditions for scientific activity have been deliberately favored over measures aimed at organizing, even in the name of precaution, its isolation. It might be understandable, in a context of major political tensions and strong ideological pressures, to favor mechanisms of overprotection. However, universities must not become normative fortresses, concerned with compliance rather than with their fundamental mission of producing and transmitting new knowledge. Research, by its very nature, involves risks. It is therefore crucial that every player in the academic ecosystem be able to exercise their responsibilities within a framework designed to protect, above all, the dynamics of scientific work.

4.1. Academic freedom and research security: protection without restriction

Among recent notable initiatives, the May 2024 recommendation by the Council of the European Union¹⁴⁹ on strengthening research security marks an important step forward. It calls for a collective redefinition of research security, not as a defensive concept, but as a strategic pillar aligned with fundamental European values. It emphasizes that universities are both drivers of strategic innovation and particularly vulnerable places. We have emphasized earlier that the protection of academic freedom must be considered in conjunction with that of research security. This defined concept is relatively stable. But its interpretation varies depending on whether the focus is primarily on security or science. Research security refers to all the legal, institutional, and operational mechanisms designed to protect the scientific ecosystem. It encompasses the protection of infrastructure, data, and know-how, but also, above all, the protection of academics against undue interference, strategic misappropriation, and discreet forms of appropriation of results. This concept calls for shared but differentiated responsibility: governments, funding agencies, universities, research organizations, learned societies, and international partners must assume complementary roles, according to their specific mandates.

The challenge is not to secure research in an abstract way, but rather to develop targeted, proportionate responses tailored to specific risks, considering the changing scientific, disciplinary, and geopolitical contexts. Research security is part of a constellation of principles: scientific integrity, science diplomacy, responsible internationalization, and academic freedom. It is not opposed to scientific openness: it is the very condition that enables it.

From this perspective, research security involves:

- mapping risks by discipline, type of data, institutional partners, and geopolitical areas;
- establishing due diligence protocols and shared eligibility criteria for international cooperation;
- training teachers and researchers in the challenges of dual-use technologies, foreign interference, conflicts of interest, and commitments;
- developing oversight mechanisms compatible with academic autonomy and based on institutional responsibility.

These generic measures are often inspired by security considerations outside the academic world but remain insufficient. Risks must be assessed in context and responses must comply with open science standards.

Unlike the United States, the European Union cannot rely on an immediately unified national security doctrine. Unlike China, it cannot subordinate research to centralized planning. But this constraint can become a strategic lever and form the basis of an original and balanced model. The aim is to promote a strategy of “smart de-risking”: intelligent and contextual risk reduction, combined with the preservation of the vitality of scientific partnerships on a global scale. European Union member states do not need a defensive stance but rather a genuine strategic repositioning. In a context of global redistribution of scientific power and faced with strategies of real or fake disconnection, the European Union can offer an alternative model: protective but not inward-looking. It has the means to define a clear and legally secure science diplomacy of

¹⁴⁹ See https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C_202403510

cooperation, based on a transparent assessment of the risks involved, as recommended by a group of European experts in a February 2025 report¹⁵⁰.

To address growing threats, the European Union and its Member States must promote an approach based on targeted experimentation and interdisciplinary engagement, through:

- the establishment of pilot risk assessment mechanisms within universities, with external supervision;
- conducting comparative studies to identify best practices in security at European universities;
- formalizing clear conditions for scientific cooperation identified as sensitive;
- supporting advanced data protection methods (e.g., differential privacy);
- developing platforms for reporting interference in research activities.

This requires a renewed academic governance based on:

- the creation of a European program dedicated to research security, coordinated with national ecosystems and European university alliances (already anticipated with the dedicated various Horizon Europe 2025-26 programs);
- the implementation of operational protocols for high-risk collaborations;

We would welcome the establishment of a European observatory to monitor the geopolitical dynamics of research and identify patterns of interference and exploitation. This requires the creation of a permanent observatory of violations of academic freedom, capable of issuing alerts, reports, and independent analyses.

Protecting research cannot be limited to external measures. It requires an internal transformation of European universities: they must equip themselves with governance frameworks capable of anticipating the risks described. This specifically requires to: align security measures with fundamental rights, academic freedom, and the principles of open science; integrate research security into ethics committees and international relations departments; and institutionalize risk assessment procedures for strategic partnerships and sensitive areas.

Designing security measures that are proportionate, transparent, and democratically legitimate is now one of the major challenges facing European research leaders. Platforms such as the G7 SIGRE (Science and Integrity of the Global Research Ecosystem) and the OECD have initiated a normative convergence around common principles for open and secure science.

A concrete and structuring measure would be the creation of a European Academic Freedom Index, integrated into European university rankings and developed:

¹⁵⁰ A European framework for science diplomacy, collective of 130 experts incl this report's author: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/news/all-research-and-innovation-news/european-framework-science-diplomacy-2025-02-13_en

-in line with the recommendations of the European Parliament (EPRS/STOA 2023/740228), calling for an independent, systematic, comparative monitoring tool that integrates the field reality.

-in close collaboration with the European University Association (EUA), which already has recognized expertise on issues of autonomy and governance;

-at the national level, under the coordination of France Universités, with an *ad hoc* scientific council;

The creation of a European academic freedom index, integrated into university ranking and steering systems, is a strategic priority for Europe. This index would combine normative data (legal frameworks, statutory guarantees), empirical observations (governance practices, cases of censorship or pressure) and institutional self-assessments. It would be based on the proposals put forward in the European Parliament report (STOA, 2023), would work in synergy with the European University Association (EUA), hand in hand with European university alliances and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights¹⁵¹, as well as networks of specialized researchers. Such an initiative would also serve as a lever for changing international rankings by incorporating criteria related to academic freedom, as has been the case for impact and sustainable development indicators over the past decade.

This index would not be a mere technical tool: it would serve as the basis for a coherent European strategy to strengthen academic freedom, support threatened institutions, recognize good practices, and establish conditionality in certain funding or cooperation mechanisms. To this end, it would be appropriate to reactivate and rethink the European Higher Education Sector Observatory (EHESO). This existing ranking index is currently dormant and falls far short of the ambitions that led to its creation. The EHESO should become a benchmark ranking and a platform for collecting, comparing, and disseminating data on the democratic and academic quality of institutions at the national and European levels.

Finally, a strategic dialogue with the main international ranking agencies (THE, QS, ARWU, Shanghai) must be urgently initiated without delay to encourage their inclusion of academic freedom and scientific integrity into their evaluation criteria. Europe cannot limit itself to applying standards designed elsewhere: it must actively contribute to their redefinition and affirm that scientific excellence is inseparable from freedom and security in research.

4.2. Science diplomacy at the service of the defense academic freedom and universities

France has been somewhat of a pioneer in this field. Following on from the 2022 Marseille Declaration on international cooperation in research and education and the science diplomacy deployed as part of the *Choose France* program¹⁵², the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEAE) undertook in 2019 to integrate academic freedom into its foreign policy priorities, through the Joint Units of French Research Institutes Abroad (UMIFRE). This impetus gave rise to a founding forum published in the “Cahiers des UMIFRE” in 2019, co-signed by 24

¹⁵¹ See https://european-union.europa.eu/institutions-law-budget/institutions-and-bodies/search-all-eu-institutions-and-bodies/european-union-agency-fundamental-rights-fra_fr

¹⁵² See <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/choose-france> <https://www.francealumni.fr/en/news/report-on-the-choose-france-2025-summit-more-than-50-business-location-projects-and-40-billion-in-investments-9648>

center directors, to keep research alive. It highlighted the growing sophistication of post-Cold War threats, including in liberal democracies.

In this dynamic, several levers can be strengthened by:

-Supporting mechanisms for welcoming threatened researchers: consolidating the PAUSE program and developing cross-partnerships between higher education institutions (via France Universités).

-Encouraging self-managed scientific solidarity initiatives, such as *#ScienceforUkraine*¹⁵³, by providing them with institutional support.

-Creating a “European refugee scientist talent” passport, a long-standing wish of the PAUSE program, modeled on existing “talent passports” allowing for easier access to hosting, mobility, and funding opportunities for exiled researchers within the European Research Area.

Box 11: Recommendations of the European University Association (EUA) on academic freedom.

The reference document¹⁵⁴ below was produced by the European University Association (EUA). It sets out a series of essential recommendations on academic freedom. Higher education institutions and public authorities would do well to take active inspiration from it.

1) Key actors and actions to support academic freedom

The responsibility for academic freedom protection and promotion is shared among different actors. In their joint 2019 statement on academic freedom and institutional autonomy, EUA, the European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities (ALLEA) and Science Europe articulated some key actions.

This statement notably called on governments and public authorities to:

- set and guarantee legal, regulatory and financial frameworks that safeguard and strengthen academic freedom and institutional autonomy;
- refrain from undue interference in the internal affairs of universities;
- engage in a continuous trust-based dialogue with the sector;
- protect the autonomy of funding decisions by research councils and funding bodies and the diversity of research funded.

This call to action directed at governments and public authorities remains applicable today. In addition, the following guidelines seek to highlight the central role of universities as institutions and offer concrete and practical steps for university leadership, individual academics and

¹⁵³ See <https://scienceforukraine.eu/>

¹⁵⁴ *How universities can protect and promote academic freedom, EUA principles and guidelines, Février 2025*, See <https://www.eua.eu/publications/positions/how-universities-can-protect-and-promote-academic-freedom.html>

university communities, including students, to make the protection and promotion of academic freedom a daily reality at European universities.

2) Guidelines for university leadership

GUIDELINE 1

University leadership should foster acceptance of a shared institutional understanding of academic freedom, develop related guidelines and policies and strive to operationalise them, with the aim of creating an institutional culture where both the principle and exercise of academic freedom are valued and encouraged.

GUIDELINE 2

Within applicable legal frameworks, university leadership should ensure functional collegial structures and enable meaningful participation of the different university communities in institutional decision-making, thus sustaining academic self-governance as a cornerstone of academic freedom.

- Academic freedom and free speech are not the same, and universities should accommodate both. How can leaders navigate the nexus between their institutions' role as guardians of the scientific method and rational, evidence-based argumentation and discussion, and the need for universities to offer a space for the voicing of uncomfortable, controversial and even radical views, which necessarily emerge during difficult and complex societal debates?
- Pressures on academic freedom do not always originate outside the university. How can university leaders best manage intra-institutional conflicts – between students and academics, between academics and leadership, or within research communities – in which academic freedom is (perceived to be) violated? How can leadership critically assess its own potential role in such conflicts?

GUIDELINE 3

University leadership should create structures and processes for shared and transparent reflection on the challenges involved in balancing academic freedom with other institutional goals and values (cf. 'Reflections for university leadership').

GUIDELINE 4

University leadership should work to shield research and teaching communities from undue external pressure and interference and protect members of the university community from intimidation and reprisals.

GUIDELINE 5

University leadership, on behalf of the sector, should defend academic freedom in constructive and continuous dialogue with the government/public authorities and other external stakeholders, such as business or industry, to foster mutual understanding and trust.

GUIDELINE 6

University leadership should work towards securing diverse funding to avoid overdependence on a single source and balance varied – and potentially conflicting – financial priorities.

3) Creating a culture of academic freedom: measures and tools

Concrete measures and tools to strengthen academic freedom will differ between countries and institutions. However, in all cases, EUA recommends that universities consider and formulate internal policies and guidelines, as well as a ‘toolbox’ for academic freedom protection and promotion. Crucially, the latter should engage the university as a community, from the leadership level to the student body. Some possible measures and tools may include:

- Developing codes of conduct and referencing these in relevant internal documents (e.g. employment contracts, job descriptions).
- Establishing a function and focus point (e.g. a dedicated body or a designated member of the leadership team) for issues relating to academic freedom.
- Organising regular seminars/discussions on academic freedom, involving the entire university community as well as external partners and members of civil society.
- Organising mandatory and recurring training sessions on academic freedom (and related values, such as integrity) for students and staff.
- Incorporating academic freedom (and related values, such as integrity) in curricula and teacher training.

4) Guidelines for university communities

GUIDELINE 1

Each member of the university community is responsible for ensuring academic freedom. Individual academics and students should adhere to fundamental values, such as academic integrity, quality and responsibility, and be aware of their own and their institution’s role in society.

GUIDELINE 2

Individual academics and university communities should work to raise awareness of matters of academic freedom, by explicitly and actively encouraging open and rigorous debate in the context of scientific endeavor and academic scholarship, including on complex and difficult topics.

GUIDELINE 3

Individual academics and university communities should make a strong public case for academic freedom, to explain why it is a necessary precondition for universities to fulfil their public mandate and responsibilities toward society.

Conclusion

This report highlights profound, convergent, and simultaneous transformations that are disrupting the scientific ecosystem at the global, European, and national levels, and call for immediate vigilance. On the one hand, we are witnessing an accelerated reconfiguration of internal political and geopolitical balances. On the other hand, the rise of authoritarianism and sciento-populism, combined with the erosion of democracies, is intensifying conflicts and fueling the rapid growth of the scientific capabilities of techno-nationalist regimes.

At the same time, attacks on academic freedom are now taking root at the very heart of democracies, sometimes in spectacular fashion, as in the United States or Hungary. On the one hand, techno-nationalist regimes are reducing science to mere technological tools; on the other, democracies are targeting climate science, life sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. Within societies, the traditional determinants of scientific skepticism are also changing radically: neither level of education nor religiosity are sufficient to explain mistrust of knowledge. The rejection of knowledge is now largely based on radical political affiliations. A major consequence of this form of scientific populism is the growing politicization of all academic fields (climate, health, history, sociology, gender, political science, technology, biology, mathematics, etc.), profoundly weakening the public sphere.

What's more, knowledge is not only rejected: it is also exploited and misused to fuel conspiracy theories and extremist narratives¹⁵⁵. On a global scale, the challenge is doubly existential: that democratic regimes remain scientific powers, and that scientific powers remain democracies. This dual challenge is seriously jeopardized by the current trajectory.

In Europe, unlike in the United States, a major challenge lies in the absence of political, civic, and professional cultures firmly rooted in academic freedom, a deficiency that is particularly evident in France. While a “Trump-style” or “Hungarian-style” scenario does not appear imminent at this stage, the structural weaknesses identified in this study could make such a development plausible if an illiberal, authoritarian government comes to power. It is therefore both prudent and necessary to prepare for this now.

Historical experience shows that any right can, in a given socio-political context, backfire on those it is supposed to protect. Academic freedom is no exception to this rule, especially since the first attacks do not generally involve a brutal suppression of existing rights, but rather a discursive diversion that reverses their meaning. Gradually, this logic intensifies and eventually imposes itself on everyone. Under McCarthyism, the very principle of academic freedom was used as a pretext, in the name of pluralism of ideas, to legitimize the surveillance, stigmatization, and exclusion of academics accused of being “communists” by the US administration. Similarly, in Turkey, Russia, China, Iran, Hungary, Argentina, Nigeria, and many other countries around the world, public authorities have invoked reasons of state or the defense of traditional values to justify the subordination of academic institutions. The logic of misappropriation also applies to other types of rights: freedom of expression can be used to spread hate speech, freedom of association to organize extremist groups aimed at its destruction, and the right to security to introduce emergency laws that

¹⁵⁵ Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, Zhuoying You, and Peter Teirlinck, *The political extremes and innovation: How support for extreme parties shapes overall and green scientific research and technological innovation in Europe*, Research Policy, 54(9), Article 105307, 2025; Niels G. Mede, Emily L. Howell, Mike S. Schäfer, Julia Metag, Becca Beets, and Dominique Brossard, Measuring science literacy in a digital world: Development and validation of a multi-dimensional survey scale, Science Communication, 2025.

ultimately allow authoritarian parties, even elected ones, to undermine the foundations of democracy.

This awareness of the potential boomerang effect of academic freedom in any authoritarian context requires active, united, and inventive vigilance. Academics must devise new ways of bringing their profession to life, alongside their students and the new generation of colleagues, mobilizing collectively and forging numerous and direct links with civil society. This means developing a genuine relational culture of academic freedom, i.e., a living relationship with this freedom, built through the joint commitment of researchers, students, institutions, and civil society, in the interest of all¹⁵⁶.

Proclaiming academic freedom as a simple principle is no longer enough, and it would be suicidal to believe that it can defend itself. The situation is certainly worrying, but it also opens unprecedented opportunities for collective mobilization and democratic innovation.

Afterword

This work originated from a mission on academic freedom entrusted in 2023 to Mathias Vicherat, former director of Sciences Po, by the then president of France Universités, Manuel Tunon de Lara. Over time, this mission evolved into an independent study that I conducted for France Universités.

Sciences Po was chosen to conduct this research for several distinct but equally important reasons. First, two of its faculty members from the Center for International Research (CERI/CNRS) had been arrested: African sociologist Roland Marchal and Afghanistan and Iran anthropologist Fariba Adelkhah, who were being held in Evin Prison in Tehran, mobilizing the entire academic community. Furthermore, following in the footsteps of its former scientific director, Bruno Latour, Sciences Po affirmed its institutional commitment to becoming both a center for reflection on the subject and a place of refuge for refugee scientists. Sciences Po also became the leader of the European consortium CIVICA, to which the Central European University (CEU) belongs. The CEU was forced to relocate to Vienna in 2019 to escape attacks and threats of liquidation by the Hungarian government. As a highly internationalized social sciences research university and an active member of the U7+ alliance, Sciences Po found itself at the heart of a global network of universities and students facing, like itself, a wave of viral political and media attacks targeting academic freedom. Taking advantage of this international positioning made it possible to compare the dynamics and best practices at work elsewhere, while shifting the focus away from the French experience.

As Dean of the University College at Sciences Po, I was appointed to lead this study because of my research on science diplomacy, my role in drafting the nomination of researcher Fariba Adelkhah for the Nobel Peace Prize for academic freedom, my work on the scientific rise of

¹⁵⁶ As Anne Pirrie and Kari Manum invite us to rethink it in “Reimagining academic freedom: a companion piece,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, March 6, 2024: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopedu/qhae017>

the People's Republic of China, and, finally, as the first “academic freedom advisor.” As a passionate teacher and researcher, I conceived this work as a contribution to collective reflection, in the hope of helping to preserve one of our most precious assets: freedom of knowledge. Throughout my professional career, in various contexts, I have witnessed colleagues being silenced, their knowledge seemingly powerless in the face of the forces working against them. Yet, over time, their erudition, dignity, and determination to practice their profession made them indomitable. This study is dedicated to them, as well as to all students.

This research was based on a group of around 20 members, including 11 presidents of French universities, representatives of higher education and research unions, and students, both elected and volunteer. From the outset, it seemed essential to involve our students in this reflection, as they are one of the main sources of inspiration and will ultimately be the first to benefit from the conclusions that emerge. In 2023, the group held monthly meetings. These were followed by interviews with academics who had sometimes been victims of violations of academic freedom, science journalists, NGOs, lawyers, senators and parliamentarians of various political persuasions, professional scholarly associations, both in France and internationally (in Europe, North America, and Asia-Pacific), as well as contributions to several international conferences (AFSP, APSA, Gis MENA, EISA) and on radio and television programs aimed at the general public. Contact was established with the office of the Defender of Rights. We were then heard, alongside Marie-Cécile Naves (France Universités) and Mathias Vicherat, by the ESRI Ethics Committee. In addition, I was interviewed as part of the Senate fact-finding mission led by André Gattolin on extra-European influences in the academic world¹⁵⁷.

Today, in the United States, academic knowledge is under direct attack. These events remind us, including in Europe and France, of the urgent need to protect this common good from any exploitation.

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¹⁵⁷ The mission's report is available here: <https://www.senat.fr/travaux-parlementaires/structures-temporaires/missions-dinformation-communes/archives/mission-dinformation-influences-etatiques-extra-europeennes-dans-le-monde-universitaire-et-academique-francais-et-leurs-incidences.html>

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Acronyms

AFI : Academic Freedom Index

AFM : Academic Freedom Monitor

AFSP : Association française de science politique (*French Political Science Association*)

AFS : Association française de sociologie (*French Association for Sociology*)

ALLEA : Fédération européenne des académies des sciences et des sciences humaines (*European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities*)

CEDH : Cour européenne des droits de l'homme (*ECHR: European Court of Human Rights*)

CNESER : Conseil national de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche (*National Council for Higher Education and Research*)

CNRS : Centre national de la recherche scientifique (*National Center for Scientific Research*)

CPU : Conférence des professeurs des Universités (*Conference of University Professors*)

EHESO : The European Higher Education Sector Observatory (*Observatoire européen du secteur de l'enseignement supérieur*)

EPSCP : Établissement public à caractère scientifique, culturel et professionnel (*Public Scientific, Cultural and Professional Institution*)

ESR(I): Enseignement supérieur, recherche et innovation (*Higher Education, Research and Innovation*)

EUA : European University Association

FAIR : (Data) findable, accessible, interoperable, reusable.

FSD : Fonctionnaires Sécurité Défense (*Defense Security Civil Servants*)

GIS : Groupement d'Intérêt Scientifique (*Scientific Interest Group*)

INRAE : Institut national de recherche pour l'agriculture, l'alimentation et l'environnement (*National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and the Environment*)

LRU : Loi relative aux libertés et responsabilités des universités (*Law on the freedoms and responsibilities of universities*)

MEAE : Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères (*Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs*)

OALA : Observatoire des atteintes à la liberté académique (*Violations of Academic Freedom Observatory*)

PAUSE : Programme national d'accueil en urgence des scientifiques en exil (*National emergency welcoming program for scientists in exile*)

PPST : Protection du potentiel technique et scientifique de la nation (*Protection of the Nation's technical and scientific potential*)

QPC : Question prioritaire de constitutionnalité (*Priority Preliminary Review on Constitutionality*)

SHS : Sciences humaines et sociales (*Humanities and Social sciences*)

SLAPPs : Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation

STEM : Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

SUHF : *Sveriges universitets-och högskoleförbund* (*Swedish Association of Universities and Colleges*)

UMIFRE : Unités mixtes des instituts français de recherche à l'étranger (*Joint Units of French Research Institutes Abroad*)

ZRR : Zone à régime restrictif (*Security Restricted Areas*)

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Annexes:

Annex 1 Summary of the 65 proposals

Themes	Main proposals	Sub-proposals
I. New legal instruments	Constitutionalize academic freedom/put academic freedom on the constitutional agenda.	Through interpretation or jurisprudential extension of the 1946 Preamble; through constitutional revision; Drafting a Charter of Academic Freedom inspired by the <i>Magna Charta Universitatum</i> ; Adoption of a framework law; Strategic preliminary review on constitutionality (QPC); Gradual integration of France's international commitments.
	Specifically combat SLAPP suits against academics	Provide for dissuasive fines in cases of abusive proceedings; Strengthen procedural safeguards for accused persons; Increase penalties for false accusations; Provide enhanced institutional support for targeted researchers; Draw inspiration from whistleblower legislation to ensure better support for academics.
	Establish an autonomous system for the protection of sources in the field of research	Recognize the principle of confidentiality of researchers' sources, by analogy with the protection afforded to journalists; Incorporate a specific regime for sensitive data into the Research Code; Base this regime on other existing doctrines derived from European case law.
	Revise the system for protecting scientific and technical potential (PPST).	Full mobilization with expansion to the humanities and social sciences and intangible heritage; Creation of tools for better coordination between scientific security and freedom.
II. University reform	Strengthen and systematize functional protection.	Enhanced functional protection; Dedicated national fund (France Universités); Emergency response protocol; Committee for academic freedom and national register; Appointment of a representative; Systematic training; confidentiality charter; Academic solidarity platform; Widespread adoption of charters; Ethical funding rules; Common rules on “institutional

		duty of discretion/restraint”; Integration of academic freedom into institutional self-assessment; Adoption of the <i>Magna Charta Universitatum</i> by institutions.
	Academic freedom and research security (FSD/ZRR)	Integrate FSDs into missions and strengthen research training; Sufficient presence (full-time/part-time); Traceability of authorizations/refusals; Regular reviews with consultation; Formal notifications with recourse; Adaptation to specific disciplinary characteristics (e.g., social sciences and humanities); Deployment of an action research program; Creation/strengthening of existing observatories; Implementation of new protocols/research methods for “restricted” fields.
III. With Civil Society	Promote a culture of Academic Freedom	National campaign on academic freedom starting in the 2025-2026 academic year; Fun and educational content (drawings, comics, PSAs); Transforming the Science Festival into a “Science and Academic Freedom Festival”; Actively involving students (conferences, competitions, performances); Creation of an Academic Freedom Award.
IV. European scale and science diplomacy	Mobilize the tools of European science diplomacy	Strengthen the European research security program with a focus on academic freedom; Create a European observatory on academic freedom with reporting platforms and risk mapping; Formalize security conditions for sensitive collaborations; Establish a European Research Freedom Act for data protection; Reactivate the European EHESO ranking; Create a European index of academic freedom; Create a European label for protective institutions; Mobilize the European University Association (EUA) network.

Annex 2 Articles 2, 41, and 47 of Law No. 81-766 of July 29, 1881, on freedom of the press (consolidated versions).

Article 2: Amended by Law No. 2010-1 of January 4, 2010 - Art. 1 (V)

"The confidentiality of journalists' sources is protected in the exercise of their mission to inform the public.

Any person who, in the exercise of their profession in one or more press, online public communication, audiovisual communication, or news agency companies, regularly and for remuneration, collects information and disseminates it to the public is considered a journalist within the meaning of the first paragraph.

The confidentiality of sources may only be breached directly or indirectly if justified by an overriding public interest and if the measures envisaged are strictly necessary and proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued. Such a breach may in no case consist of an obligation for the journalist to reveal his or her sources.

Seeking to discover a journalist's sources by investigating any person who, because of their usual relations with a journalist, may have information enabling those sources to be identified shall be considered an indirect infringement of the confidentiality of sources within the meaning of the third paragraph.

During criminal proceedings, in order to assess the necessity of the infringement, account shall be taken of the seriousness of the crime or offense, the importance of the information sought for the prosecution or prevention of that offense, and the fact that the investigative measures envisaged are essential to the manifestation of the truth"¹⁵⁹.

Article 41 - Amended by Law No. 2008-1187 of November 14, 2008 - Art. 1

"No action shall be brought against speeches made in the National Assembly or the Senate, or against reports or any other documents printed by order of either of these two assemblies.

¹⁵⁹ See https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/article_lc/LEGIARTI000006417430/
For the complete consolidated text, incl. modification n°2010-1 January 4th 2010.

No action shall be taken based on reports of public sessions of the assemblies referred to in the above paragraph published in good faith in newspapers.

No action for defamation, insult, or contempt shall be brought against statements made or writings produced before a commission of inquiry created within the National Assembly or the Senate by the person required to appear before it, unless they are unrelated to the subject matter of the inquiry, nor against faithful reports of the public meetings of such commission made in good faith.

No action for defamation, insult or contempt shall be brought against any person for any statement made in good faith in the course of judicial proceedings, or for any speech made or writing produced before the courts.

Nevertheless, judges hearing the case and ruling on the merits may order the removal of abusive, insulting, or defamatory speeches and award damages to the appropriate parties.

However, defamatory statements unrelated to the case may give rise to either public prosecution or civil action by the parties, where such actions have been reserved for them by the courts, and, in all cases, to civil action by third parties.^[2]

Article 47.

“The prosecution of police offenses and contraventions committed through the press or any other means of publication shall take place ex officio and at the request of the public prosecutor, subject to the following modifications”¹⁶⁰.

Annex 3: Farida Shaheed, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education: “Principles for the implementation of the right to academic freedom” July 2024¹⁶¹. Recommendations:

82. The Special Rapporteur calls upon the Human Rights Council to fully consider the Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom, which articulate nine essential aspects to substantially guarantee protection, promotion and enjoyment of the right to academic freedom, and to encourage their implementation.

¹⁶⁰ See https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/article_lc/LEGIARTI000006417469/

For the complete consolidated text, incl. modification n°2008-1187 du November 14th 2008.

¹⁶¹ Shaheed, F. (2024). *Academic freedom: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education* (Human Rights Council, 56th session, June 18–July 12, 2024, Agenda item 3). United Nations. [A/HRC/56/XX]

83. The Special Rapporteur also calls upon Member States and other relevant stakeholders, including public and private educational institutions, to fully implement the above principles.

84. stakeholders:

The Special Rapporteur also recommends that States and, where relevant, other

(a) Ensure constitutional and legal recognition of academic freedom as an autonomous right at the national level, clarifying that it is applicable at all levels of education, for researchers, educators and students;

(b) Promote knowledge of the importance and meaning of academic freedom among academic, research and teaching institutions, as well as the wider public;

(c) Respect, protect and promote academic freedom and resort only to

limitations that are in accordance with international human rights law, in particular article 4 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;

(d) Refrain both from direct repression of people exercising their academic freedom and from more subtle methods that aim to or result in restricting academic and scientific debate, in particular those that are carried out through funding, privatization, commodification, digitalization, platformization and assetization of education, as well as conflicts of interest;

(e) Ensure that the teaching profession enjoys academic freedom in the discharge of professional duties;

(f) Also, ensure that:

(i) Official standards determine the goals and outcomes of teaching without

prescribing the content of materials;

(ii) Develop guidelines for writing textbooks to enable authors to offer various

interpretations and include various standpoints;

(iii) Accredite a wide array of textbooks by a range of publishers, with the participation of teachers or teachers' unions, and allow teachers to choose from them and enable teachers to introduce supplementary materials without prior approval of ministries of education;

(iv) Clarify approval and accreditation procedures and criteria for textbook selection relying on expertise rather than on particular ideological or political requirements;

(g) Review the concept of "neutrality of teaching" in the light of the right to academic freedom, taking into account:

(i) Students' right to education, which implies a right to access information, in accordance with their developing capacities and their age and maturity;

(ii) The right to freedom of expression and academic freedom of teachers who have special responsibilities that vary depending on the age and maturity of students;

(iii) Students' right to academic freedom, including the right to express themselves on specific subjects without fear of reprisal;

(iv) The respect due to cultural diversity and the need to ensure a multiperspective approach, including in subjects such as history;

(v) International standards regarding possible limitations to human rights;

(h) Respect, protect and promote institutional autonomy as instrumental to academic freedom and ensure that private academic, research and teaching institutions respect academic freedom;

(i) Ensure adequate public funding of academic, research and teaching institutions as a way to foster academic freedom, especially through untied non-performance based funding; simultaneously ensure that systems of financing, whether public or private, not-for-profit or for-profit, safeguard academic freedom and institutional autonomy from undue influence, pressure, restrictions or retaliation by sources of financial support; in particular, “no influence” clauses should be systematically introduced into agreements between academic, research and teaching institutions and private funders or partners, as well as philanthropists, especially on research agendas and hiring practices; and corporate research contracts should be approved by the academic body of institutions and funding procedures should be fair

and fully transparent;

(j) institutions;

Refrain from surveillance, whether physical or online, of educational institutions, staff and students and ban facial recognition technologies from such

(k) Fully consider and address the threats that the digitalization and platformization of education, including resort to artificial intelligence, present to academic freedom of teachers and students; implement regulations governing the use of educational technology in academic settings, including private institutions, ensuring alignment with robust data protection standards, and guarantee that educational institutions create an environment that enables rather than suppresses academic freedom;

(l) Ensure that the use of artificial intelligence does not undermine the human rights of educators and students or disempower them and that they are taught about its ethical use;

(m) Address the impact of the erosion of tenure, short-term or part-time contracts, lack of financial security, new public management techniques and the increase of administrative workloads on the working conditions of research and education personnel and on their academic freedom.

Annex 4 Gattolin report, 2021- objectives and measures summary¹⁶².

Goals	Measures
1. Prioritize foreign interference	- Assess and map threats (inventory) - Create an interinstitutional scientific observatory - Produce an updated baseline study on foreign influence - Regularly inform Parliament and foster debate
2. Support universities in defending their values	- Extend the PPST to all disciplines, including social sciences and humanities - Strengthen the role of the ethics committee and the HFDS - Establish a formalized network of FSDs with training missions

¹⁶² See <https://www.senat.fr/salle-de-presse/dossiers-de-presse-2021-2022/influences-etatiques-extra-europeennes.html>

	- Distribute best practice guides - Secure information systems and funding - Allocate dedicated budgetary resources
3. Ensure transparency and reciprocity	- Make it mandatory to declare non-European funding - Establish a transparency regime for all international projects - Require reciprocity in academic exchanges - Include clauses on respect for academic freedom in all agreements
4. Monitor international partnerships	- Amend regulations to require consultation with relevant ministries before any agreement is signed - Set a maximum time limit for project review - Include non-European subsidiaries in monitoring procedures
5. Promote a regulatory framework at all levels	- Create a legal framework to punish violations of academic freedom - Launch an aggressive European science diplomacy - Propose a new international ranking based on academic values - Develop an international standard for due diligence and compliance

Annex 5 Examples of (bilingual) educational initiatives launched by Sciences Po after October 7, 2023, for students, supervisory staff, and faculty members¹⁶³

2023 seminars:

- Hamas-Israel: Goals of war, in what international context? French Political Science Association, December 18,
- Israel/Hamas: War, by what right? with Julia Grignon, Samy Cohen, Étienne Dignat, Sharon Weill, CERI, February 7,
- What is next for Palestinians? Internal debates vs. external demands, Sanaa Al Sarghali, and Guillaume Tusseau, School of Law. In English.
- Seminars in 2023-2024, notably at the Europe-Middle East Campus in Menton:
 - The Israeli Palestinian crisis, tensions in the Middle East: analysis of a burning issue and its repercussions in France, Masterclass by Gilles Kepel, December 4-6, 2023,
 - The process of drafting the Palestinian constitution, lecture by Sanaa Alsarghali, Palestinian constitutionalist, December 8, 2023,

¹⁶³ Information gathered by Corinne Deloy. Details can be found at <https://www.sciencespo.fr/en/news/war-in-gaza-sciences-po-mobilises/>

- Lecture by Clothilde Mraffko, correspondent for the newspaper *Le Monde* in Jerusalem, February 16, 2024,
- Lecture by Denis Charbit, Franco-Israeli professor of political science, April 18, 2024.
- Movie cycle on Gaza and Palestine: *Gaza mon amour* (December 2023); *Voyage à Gaza* (November 2024); *Bye Bye Tibériade* (November 2024). In English.
- Organization of a conference with Palestinian artist, photographer, and painter Mohamed Abusal, from Gaza (November 2024). In English.
- Two-day training for postgraduate students. May 15 & 16, 2025. In English.

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/mena/fr/actualites/navigating-uncertainty-the-case-for-interim-constitutions-in-syria-and-palestine-two-day-training-for-postgraduate-students/>

- Series of lessons on the conflict in the Middle East

https://sources.sciencespo.fr/content/BcQcI65wkGlZGLkbYCWe#_gl=1*lny15*_gcl_au*MTM2Njk3NDAYNS4xNzQ2NzMyNzgy

Considering the resurgence of conflict in the Middle East, Sciences Po is offering a series of 12 lessons designed by the North Africa and Middle East Program. From October 2024 to April 2025, twelve lessons will be offered by faculty members who are specialists in the region. These lessons will address the conflict using tools from various social sciences: history, political science, sociology, and economics.

To accompany this series of lessons, the Sciences Po library offers a variety of resources. Academic literature on the Israeli Palestinian political and military conflict is linked to resources that allow it to be examined in the light of other themes: societal, cultural, legal, or environmental. https://archives.sciencespo.fr/galerie/galerie/images/27/n:53#_gl=1*ki8s33*_gcl_au*MTI5OTEyNTg1Ni4xNzQxNTk4NzE2

Summary

- [The emergence of the Palestinian question \(1897-1947\)](#). Vincent Lemire. Professor of History, Paris Est Gustave Eiffel University
- [Zionism: why Israel?](#) Alain Dieckhoff. Director of Research at CNRS, CERI/Sciences Po

- [Palestinian refugees in the Middle East](#). Kamel Doraï. Researcher at CNRS, MIGRINTER laboratory at the University of Poitiers
- [The making of a nation: Israel](#). Denis Charbit. Professor of Political Science, Open University of Israel
- [The Palestinians and Israel](#). Laetitia Bucaille. Professor of Political Sociology, INALCO
- [Israel, what kind of democracy?](#) Samy Cohen. Emeritus Director of Research, CERI/Sciences Po
- Living and getting involved in the West Bank and Gaza. Stéphanie Latte Abdallah. Director of Research at the CNRS, Césor/EHESS
- Israel and the Palestinians (1948-2025). Mark Tessler. Professor of Political Science, Institute for Social Research (ISR), University of Michigan
- Hezbollah and Israel, between tension and confrontation. Joseph Bahout. Professor of Political Science, Director of the Institute of Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut. In English.
- US policy towards the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Camille Mansour. Editor-in-Chief of the Interactive Encyclopedia of the Question of Palestine
- The Gulf monarchies and the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Laurence Louër (Sciences Po). In English.
- The political economy of the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Sami Miaari. Professor of Economics, Tel Aviv University, Yale University. In English.
- Discussion on the book: To Kill or Let Live: Israel and the Morality of War, April 28, 2025
<https://www.sciencespo.fr/mena/fr/evenements/discussion-autour-de-l-ouvrage-tuer-ou-laisser-vivre/>
- From the Bandits' Alliance to Itamar Ben Gvir: archaeology of the Israeli far right, March 19, 2025
<https://www.sciencespo.fr/mena/fr/evenements/de-l-alliance-des-bandits-a-itamar-ben-gvir-archeologie-de-l-extreme-droite-israelienne/>
- “Separation Together.” Conceptualizing relations between Israelis and Palestinians before October 7, 2023, February 6, 2025

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri-evenement/fr/evenements/se-separer-ensemble-conceptualiser-les-relations-entre-israeliens-et-palestiniens-avant-le-7-octobre-2023/>

-Israel, a state unlike any other? December 11, 2024

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri-evenement/fr/evenements/israel-un-etat-pas-comme-les-autres/>

-Debate around the book “A Strange Defeat,” December 10, 2024

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/mena/fr/evenements/debat-autour-du-livre-une-etrange-defaite/>

-The post-October 7th Strategic landscape in the Middle East, December 2, 2024. In English.

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri-evenement/fr/evenements/the-post-october-7th-strategic-landscape-in-the-middle-east/>

-Israeli security forces on trial: itinerary of a research program, November 22, 2024

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri-evenement/fr/evenements/les-forces-de-securite-israeliennes-en-proces-itineraire-dun-programme-de-recherche/>

-The Role of Social Media Narratives during Conflicts, October 17, 2024. In English.

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri-evenement/fr/evenements/the-role-of-social-media-narratives-during-conflicts/>

-The International Court of Justice and the Israeli Palestinian conflict, September 26, 2024

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri-evenement/fr/evenements/la-cour-internationale-de-justice-face-au-conflit-israelo-palestinien/>

-The wars in the Middle East and their repercussions on societies in the region

Launch of the MENA program, September 26, 2024

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/mena/fr/evenements/les-guerres-du-proche-orient-et-leurs-repercussions-sur-les-societe-de-la-region>

-Strategic Blunder: The U.S. in the Middle East, September 20, 2024. In English.

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/mena/fr/evenements/strategic-blunder-the-u-s-in-the-middle-east/>

- Shifting Identities in the Middle East: Personal and Historical Perspectives, September 17, 2024. In English.

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/mena/fr/evenements/shifting-identities-in-the-middle-east-personal-and-historical-perspectives/>

-Anti-Semitism and its Denials, June 24, 2024

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/cei-evenement/fr/evenements/lantisemitisme-et-ses-negations/>

-Israel-Hamas: War, by what right? February 7, 2024

<https://obsreligion.cnrs.fr/event/israel-hamas-la-guerre-de-quel-droit/>

-Gaza and our world, April 30, 2024

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/cei-evenement/fr/evenements/gaza-et-notre-monde-gaza-and-our-world/>

CERI Files

After October 7, 2023, Coordinated by [Alain Dieckhoff](#) (with Corinne Deloy) - October 2023-September 2024

Summary of the 18 articles

- [Israeli society is currently experiencing an extraordinary moment Interview with Alain Dieckhoff](#)
- [The Israeli-Arab conflict in the Gulf regional security complex](#)

[Laurence Louër](#)

- [The hostage issue, the new pivot of the conflict. Interview with Ariel Colonomos](#)
- [Intelligence services and the army let their guard down, lulled by the illusion that Hamas had no interest in a major confrontation with Israel. Interview with Samy Cohen](#)
- [Turkey faced with the new Israeli-Palestinian war: an impossible neutrality Bayram Balci](#)
- [Palestinian support for the October 7 offensive is support for resistance to Israeli occupation. Interview with Sarah Daoud](#)
- [China faces the attacks of October 7, 2023, Quentin Couvreur](#)
- [Hamas: risks and dangers of the terrorist label, Iris Lambert](#)
- [Israel, Gaza, and their Arab neighbors. Interview with Eberhard Kienle](#)
- [“Are we witnessing the exhaustion of the empathy that part of the Western world showed for the Jews.” Interview with Marc Lazar](#)
- [What the Gaza crisis tells us about Indo-Israeli affinities and Modi's politics. Interview with Christophe Jaffrelot](#)
- [“The risk of the conflict spreading throughout the region will only increase as the war drags on.” Interview with Stéphane Lacroix.](#)
- [A massacre, massacres: the archives of October 7 and memory, Frédérique Leichter-Flack](#)
- “The UN's impotence stems from the way it operates and the type of intervention it puts in place.” Interview with Ronald Hatto
- War seen from the Maghreb. Interview with Luis Martinez
- [Death toll in Gaza: do the figures speak for themselves? with Louise Beaumais](#)
- [Scattered voices of Latin America in the face of the attacks of October 7. Interview with Kevin Parthenay](#)
- [October 7, 2023: a “disruption” in the contemporary history of the Middle East? With Mohamed-Ali Adraoui](#)

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/fr/dossierceri.html>

Defending and promoting academic Freedom. A global issue, an urgent matter for France and Europe.

Findings and proposals for action. Report for France Universités. Stéphanie BALME.

Traduction anglaise : Ch S pour France Universités.