

Briefing in advance of the Report on human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union’s policy on the matter - annual report 2023 (2023/2118(INI) (the “Report”)

Scholars at Risk Europe (“SAR Europe”) is the European office of the global Scholars at Risk network (“SAR”). SAR is an international network of more than 600 higher education institutions in 42 countries dedicated to protecting the human rights of scholars and intellectuals around the world, and to raising awareness, understanding of, and respect for the principles of academic freedom and its constituent freedoms of expression, opinion, thought, association, and travel. SAR Europe urges the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI) to highlight the importance of academic freedom for democracy in the world, and to continue to ensure that the European Union does everything in its power to protect and promote this right.

Academic Freedom Under Pressure

Academic freedom is the right of members of the academic community to discover, transmit, and question knowledge and ideas through research, teaching, learning, and discourse.¹ Academic freedom is fully and independently grounded in freedom of opinion and expression, the right to education, and the right to the benefits of science, respectively, and has elements of freedom of association, freedom of movement, and other rights.

According to the most recent [Academic Freedom Index](#), (March 2023), more than half the world’s population – over four billion people – live in States where academic freedom has been in decline over the past ten years. SAR’s most recent report from its [Free to Think](#) series outlined 391 attacks on higher education in the year ending September 1, 2022, which represents the largest number of attacks identified to date by the Academic Freedom [Monitoring Project](#).

Principles for Implementing the Right of Academic Freedom

Acknowledging that attacks against academic freedom are on the rise around the world, France, South Africa, and 72 other countries came together at the 52nd Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UN HRC) to issue an historic Joint Statement in support of Academic Freedom ([March 2023](#)). The signatories recognised that academic freedom is not only key to human rights education but also “essential for technical and scientific progress and for the development of the creative industries and the arts”, and numerous related rights and freedoms.

The statement was supported by all Member States of the European Union. A subsequent [side event on Academic Freedom](#) held at the 53rd Session of UN HRC was co-sponsored by the European Union, France, Portugal, and Uruguay. The event was opened by the Mr. Eamon Gilmore, European Union Special Representative for Human Rights, who remarked, “[a]cademic freedom is essential for any healthy democratic society. Without it, critical thinking cannot be cultivated, and critical thinking is

¹ In his report to the United Nations, the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, David Kaye, described members of the academic community as for example, “faculty, students, staff, scholars, administrators and community participants”, and academic freedom as the right “to conduct activities involving the discovery and transmission of information and ideas, and to do so with the full protection of human rights law” (see UN, Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, David Kaye, A/75/261, July 2020, Para. 8.)

key to freedom, prosperity, progress and innovation. People need to be able to share and access information in order to develop new ideas, and the freedom to research and teach, to debate and disseminate, is central to the advancement of knowledge.”

Panellists discussed new guidance, the Principles for Implementing the Right of Academic Freedom, developed by an international working group of scholars, advocates, UN staff and others. The Principles offer a framework for dialogue and activity that moves beyond statements of broad principle by offering concrete guidance for assessing and promoting implementation of the right in practice in various contexts.

Recommendations

We strongly encourage the European Parliament to prioritise and support efforts to protect and promote academic freedom, including via the upcoming Report, as follows:

- ⇒ Reiterate concern regarding increased violations of academic freedom and the censorship and imprisonment of scholars worldwide, which have important consequences for the right to education, the enjoyment of the benefits of scientific progress and the freedom of opinion and expression, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information; calling on Member State and EU Delegations to play a key role in monitoring and reporting on violations of academic freedom in third countries.
- ⇒ Highlight the EU-funded [MSCA4 Ukraine fellowship scheme](#) as a lifeline for researchers from Ukraine, and the EU-funded [Inspireurope+](#) to coordinate and strengthen support in Europe for researchers at risk. Highlight the European Commission’s intention to fund a [pilot European Fellowship Scheme to support researchers at risk](#), through the 2023 annual work programme for the implementation of pilot projects and preparatory actions in the area of education, youth, sport and culture, and its efforts to assist at-risk scholars worldwide.
- ⇒ Support the Joint Statement on Academic Freedom delivered at the 52nd Session of the Human Rights Council and supported by all Member States.
- ⇒ Support the development of the draft Principles for Implementing the Right of Academic Freedom, which can provide useful guidance to United Nations mechanisms, States, and other stakeholders. Call for the EU and its Member States to promote the adoption of guidelines on academic freedom within the UN system.

With academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and members of the academic community under attack around the world, it is essential to facilitate a greater awareness of this freedom, including by increasing its visibility in important publications, such as the European Parliament report on human rights and democracy. Actions such as this will contribute to a greater understanding of academic freedom, and ultimately a greater integration of academic freedom into the operational work of the EU Institutions and EU Member States. SAR Europe thanks the European Parliament for their continued commitment to academic freedom, and is ready to provide additional background information or context as helpful, or to assist in identifying relevant stakeholders to include in any related consultations on this topic.

About Scholars at Risk Europe

SAR Europe is hosted by Maynooth University, Ireland. SAR Europe supports and coordinates the activities of 13 SAR sections and 11 partner networks across Europe. We work to strengthen our collective voice at the European level and contribute to informed policymaking for the greater

protection of scholars and increased respect for academic freedom worldwide. SAR Europe coordinates [Inspireurope+](#) an EU-funded, multi-partner initiative to support researchers at risk, as well as [MSCA4Ukraine](#), an EU-funded fellowship scheme for displaced researchers from Ukraine. SAR Europe also works to expand, coordinate, and support advocacy in Europe to promote academic freedom, including convening the [European Coordinating Committee for Academic Freedom Advocacy](#). SAR Europe has Observer Status with the Council of Europe Steering Committee for Education ([CDEDU](#)), is a member of the Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe ([CASE](#)), and the Human Rights and Democracy Network (HRDN).

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