Briefing on Monitoring, Assessing and Reporting
Academic Freedom & Researchers at Risk
August 12, 2024

Inspireurope+ is an EU funded project that works to strengthen and coordinate support in Europe for researchers at risk. Researchers at risk are scholars, scientists, and researchers who face threats to their life, liberty, or research careers, including those who have been displaced because of such threats. Building on the work undertaken by Inspireurope (launched under MSCA in 2019), Inspireurope+ proceeds from the view that excellence in research depends upon free and open scientific debate and requires a diversity of perspectives and methodologies to flourish. The need to expand support for researchers at risk is urgent, and the value of a coordinated effort across countries and institutions that is dedicated to providing support for researchers at risk has never been clearer.

Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy and Researchers at Risk

Academic freedom is a universal right and essential to quality education, teaching and research. It is a driver of innovation, enhances the capacity of researchers to acquire, generate and distribute knowledge, and thereby protects societies' capacity for self-reflection. Its protection, promotion, and enjoyment require the autonomy of academic, research, and teaching institutions. Persecution, harassment, intimidation and violence directed at scholars, scientists and researchers not only place individual lives and careers in jeopardy, such threats also put the very future of research at stake, directly contributing to the decline of academic freedom.

Reported attacks on researchers, scholars and higher education communities.

Scholars at Risk's *Academic Freedom Monitoring Project* has, since 2011, documented severe attacks on researchers, scholars, students and higher education communities, implicating tens of thousands of victims in over 100 countries.[i] These include killings, violence, and disappearances; wrongful prosecution and imprisonment; loss of position; improper travel restrictions and other severe or systemic issues. Threats come from a range of state and non-state actors, including armed militant and extremist groups, police and military forces, government authorities, and members of higher education communities.

SAR's 2023 *Free to Think* report, the ninth in a series of annual reports on attacks on higher education communities around the world, analyses 409 reported attacks in 66 countries that occurred between July 1, 2022, and June 30, 2023.[ii] Due to limited data and monitoring resources these figures represent only a tiny fraction of the overall number of attacks occurring. However, a growing awareness of the importance of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and ensuring the safety of researchers, has resulted in the emergence of additional measures to monitor attacks on the higher education community. Most significantly, since 2020 the *Academic Freedom Index* provides an annually updated country score of de facto levels of academic freedom across the world.[iii]

Expansion of monitoring and reporting of attacks on researchers and academic freedom.

However, data on academic freedom violations globally remains incomplete with attacks often going unreported and unacknowledged. Extending monitoring efforts into more countries, more regions, and more languages is essential for gaining a greater understanding of the volume and nature of attacks on researchers and to support the creation of more effective protection responses. With 144 EU Delegations and Offices around the world, the EU and the Member States are strategically placed to gather country specific information, raise awareness, and enable much needed support for researchers at risk.[iv]

Call on EU Delegations and Member States Embassies and Consulates (thereafter "Missions"):

- Each Mission's Human Rights Country Strategy (or equivalent document) should include a section dedicated to academic freedom and at-risk researchers (*Researchers at risk are scholars, scientists, and researchers who face threats to their life, liberty, or research careers, including those who have been displaced because of such threats*).

- To guide an initial assessment of their given country of accreditation, Missions should consult Appendix I of the *Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom*, which contains a series of questions that will assist delegates undertaking this task.[v] For sources of country specific information Missions should consult publicly available tools, such as the *Academic Freedom Index* and Scholars at Risk's *Academic Freedom Monitoring Project* as well as annual reports such as SAR's *Free to Think* or country profiles by *Freedom in the World* (Freedom House). (See BOX A for more information about these tools, including where to access them).

- To compile more qualitative analysis, including variations between higher education institutions within a particular country, Missions should "engage and encourage regular dialogue with university communities and organisations whose mission it is to protect higher education communities and promote academic freedom, in order to develop the best policy frameworks, initiatives and advocacy strategies for academic freedom".[vi] For example, there are now a number of regional coalitions, in existence or in development dedicated to academic freedom. (See BOX B for more information about these coalitions).

- EU Missions are already requested to provide periodic reports on the human rights situation in their countries of accreditation. In compiling such reports, they should systematically include commentary on "incidents of concern involving threats or attacks on academic freedom, in particular violent attacks on institutions and members of the higher education community, as well as discriminatory policies or practices, undue restrictions on research or expression, wrongful prosecution or detention".[vii]

- There are three potential ways in which researchers are targeted: (1) risks related to the content of their work, research, or teaching being perceived as threatening by authorities or other groups, (2) risks related to the individual's status as an academic or researcher or (3) risks related to their peaceful exercise of basic human rights, in particular, the right to freedom of expression or freedom of association. As many researchers at risk also engage as Human Rights Defenders, any attacks against them may be categorised as both, against research and human rights. This would help to raise awareness, also for the context of persecutions, and enable the international community – including diplomatic missions – to create better protections for academic freedom.

- Where it is called for, Missions should make recommendations to the Council of the EU Working Party on Human rights (COHOM) for possible EU actions, including condemnation of threats and attacks against at-risk researchers and higher education institutions, as well as for demarches and public statements where researchers and the autonomy of institutions are at immediate or serious risk. (SEE BOX C for examples of good practice).

- The EU *Annual Report On Human Rights And Democracy In The World* should continue to include a section dedicated to academic freedom and institutional autonomy in order to spotlight the targeting, silencing and similar pressures on universities, scholars, and students around the world. This is a serious and growing problem with significant implications not only in the countries where they take place, but for democracy and societies worldwide, and our collective capacity to respond to the crisis facing humanity.

Box A. Recommended monitoring tools as sources of country specific information

- The *Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom* were drafted by a working group of United Nations experts, scholars, and civil society actors, based on and reflecting the status of international law and practice. The Principles articulate nine essential aspects to substantially guarantee protection, promotion, and enjoyment of the right to academic freedom. The Principles also provide useful considerations for assessing the implementation of academic freedom in Appendix I, and practical

guidance to improve implementation of academic freedom in Appendix II. They are available in the six United Nations languages. (A/HRC/56/CRP.2).

● The Academic Freedom Index (AFI) provides a comprehensive overview of academic freedom in 179 countries and territories. Based on assessment of the de facto protection of academic freedom, users can compare countries and investigate developments within countries over time. The AFI rests on assessments by 2,329 country experts worldwide, standardised questionnaires, and a well-established statistical model, implemented and adapted by the V-Dem project.

● SAR's Academic Freedom Monitoring Project investigates and reports attacks on higher education with the aim of raising awareness, generating advocacy, and increasing protection for scholars, students, and academic communities. The database can be searched by specific country or region, as well as date, inclusion, and type of attack. **Where feasible, Missions should also consider notifying Scholars at Risk of attacks on higher education or academic freedom by submitting information by emailing sarmonitoring@nyu.edu with a brief description of the incident and links to relevant sources.**

● *Free to Think* is an annual report by Scholars at Risk's Academic Freedom Monitoring Project. The reports explore concerning trends in attacks on higher education communities around the world, including especially chapters on threats to academic freedom in EU delegates countries of accreditation.

● *Freedom in the World* is an annual series produced by Freedom House tracking global trends in political rights and civil liberties. One of the indicators of the report reflects academic freedom "Is there academic freedom and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?".

● Technical Monitoring of fundamental values in the European Higher Education Area is to protect and promote fundamental values, among them academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The initiative of the Bologna Process is supported by the parties that participate in it (more than 40 European countries, the EU, the Council of Europe, UNESCO and European higher education sector representative organisations). Currently in a pilot phase, once this tool is operational, it will likely provide an important source for country-specific information of de jure and de facto situation of academic freedom and autonomy.

● Autonomy Scorecard of the European University Association features extensive information on the current state of university autonomy and governance reforms in Europe. In 2023, the Scorecard was updated, taking stock of university autonomy and its evolution in the past five years.

BOX B.

- The *Coalition for Academic Freedom in the Americas* (CAFA), https://cafa-claa.org/about-cafa/

- *International Solidarity For Academic Freedom In India* (InSAF),
  https://www.academicfreedomindia.com/

- *Network Academics Under Threat*: https://www.academicxsenriesgo.org/en

- For information on the regional coalition for academic freedom in Africa and Southeast ASIA, please contact Scholars at Risk at scholarsatrisk@nyu.edu.

BOX C. Example of Good Practice

Country of Concern: Nicaragua. The Ortega government's targeting of universities, scholars, and students since 2018 has been overwhelming. Universities have been sites of brutal violence; dozens of institutions have been shuttered by the government; and scores of student activists have been jailed or forced into exile in order to avoid prison. See Free to Think 2023 country profile on Nicaragua for more information, including the AFI's assessment, with the most recent monitoring incidents accessible here. The EU have actively monitored and publicly reported on the situation. For example,

- The 2023 EU *Annual Report On Human Rights And Democracy In The World,* country section on Nicaragua, stated, "Private university institutions were also closed and their assets confiscated, including the Central American University (UCA) in Managua, thus further weakening academic freedom". (2023 report, page 292)

- At HRC55 the EU Statement at the Interactive Dialogue following the report by the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua, (29 February 2024) references academic freedom.

- At the HRC the EU statement at the Interactive Dialogue following the oral update by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on Nicaragua (18 December 2023), stated: "The EU remains preoccupied with the closure of civic space, the fragility of the rule of law, and the rollback of academic freedom and Nicaraguans' right to education".

- At the HRC54, the EU statement at the Interactive Dialogue following the report by the OHCHR on Nicaragua, (12 September 2023), stated: "We deplore the rollback of academic freedom, whose latest expression has affected the Central American University among others, undermining Nicaraguans' right to education and the autonomy of universities."

Related Resources

- Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Guidelines for the Inclusion of Researchers at Risk (2021)

- European Parliament recommendation of 29 November 2018 on Defence of academic freedom in the EU's external action (2018/2117(INI))

- Frequently Asked Questions about researchers at risk.

- Compendium of resources for researchers at risk and their supporters

Contact Us

To join the Inspireurope+ mailing list and receive quarterly newsletters, sign up here.

If your organisation is interested in establishing new support measures for researchers at risk and seek advice from the Inspireurope+ consortium, please contact us at Inspireurope@mu.ie

---

[i] Learn more here: https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/actions/academic-freedom-monitoring-project/
[ii] Learn more here: https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2023/
[iii] Learn more here: https://academic-freedom-index.net/
[iv] Learn more here: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/eu-delegations_en
[v] Learn more here: https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc56crp2-principles-implementing-right-academic-freedom-working-group
[vi] European Parliament recommendation of 29 November 2018 on Defence of academic freedom in the EU's external action (2018/2117(INI)), para (l).
[vii] *Ibid.* para (h).