



# Threats to Academic Freedom Do Not Just Come from Autocrats

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Academic freedom, long taken for granted in democratic societies, is under attack from all sides. In our last editorial, we shared several examples of attacks on academic freedom, from right-wing populist leaders like Florida governor Ron DeSantis appointing politically connected presidents to left-leaning governments like the MORENA party in Mexico seizing private universities and slashing budgets. But the threat does not just come from autocrats. It comes from the use of wealth to steer research agendas, from social media harassment campaigns, from students and staff with no respect for an academic debate, and from university leaders who placate rather than defend embattled faculty.

Some might argue these stakeholders have always sought to influence universities through social and political activism—and they would be right. But this moment seems different. The stakeholders are more activated, and the tools and tactics in their hands are more intense. All the while, defunding of higher education has left universities beholden to private donors and corporate interests.

Corporate partnerships increasingly shape scientists' research agendas to align with industry needs. This shifts focus from basic research to applied domains where funding is more readily available. Researchers on short-term contracts face uncertain career prospects if corporate support dries up. Philanthropic foundations, like the Open Society Foundation, also constrain inquiry by limiting topics and methods to funder-defined activities.

Social media supercharges influence campaigns. Wealthy donors, like Harvard University alumnus Bill Ackman, use social media to criticize university leaders and promote favored board candidates to advance their agendas. X (formerly Twitter) mobs intimidate scholars from sharing controversial findings from their research. Even tenured faculty risk being put on temporary leave if they post a politically incorrect or provocative statement. The result is limited speech and narrowed research agendas.

Universities are in a weak position to defend themselves after decades of chronic underfunding by governments and cuts to arts and humanities budgets. In Uganda, president Museveni has criticized academic disciplines he deems “nonmarketable,” directing budget allocations away from programs unaligned with development agenda. A recent study for the European Parliament, *State of Play of Academic Freedom in the EU Member States*, concluded that major breaches of and threats to academic freedom can be observed across the European Union and the world. And the recent book *New Threats to Academic Freedom in Asia* provides several examples from that region.

This multifront assault on academic freedom comes at a concerning time, with over 50 countries holding presidential elections this year in both established and emerging democracies. The results of these elections could embolden populist leaders hostile to dissent. However, even if populist candidates face defeat, threats to academic freedom will remain. Threats to academic freedom do not just come in the form of violent oppression. They also come from the gradual corrosion of public debate; not just headline-grabbing cases of censorship but creeping intellectual conformity; not in one dramatic purge but death by a thousand cuts.

If universities do not fight back, what will remain of academic freedom after its slow erosion goes unaddressed? Recent European-level statements, like the Bonn Declaration and the Rome Ministerial Communiqué, affirm academic freedom as essential to democracy, but declarations alone lack concrete protections scholars need. Academic freedom requires stronger protections from universities and governments to preserve truth-seeking, no matter how unconventional, critical, or contrary the ideas are to current consensus. ▲